

Koushi Tachibana

Illustrated by *Tsunako*

Tempest Yamai

Spirit No. 8

Astral Dress—Berserk

Weapon—Bow Type [Raphael]

05



Date A Live

Tempest Yamai



Date A Live

Tempest Yamai





“A-and in
conclusion,
I would like
to résign...”

Mikie Okamine
AST Member

“Weird
emphasis,
Mikey.”

Mildred F. Fujimura
Mechanic

RESIGNATION



“...?”

Origami Tobiichi

Shido's classmate

“Hey!
Whoa!
Stop!”

Shido Itsuka

A high school student



“Ad...miration. You are very good
at this...Shido.”

Yuzuru Yamai
A fifth Spirit

“N-no fair!
Me next!”

Kaguya Yamai
A fifth Spirit



“Imagine
that wish
in your
heart and
swing the
sword.”

Tohka
A Spirit

“... Like
I’d let that
happen!”

“Agreement.
Your level of
stupidity really
does test one’s
patience. So it’s
come to this.”

“It’s no use,
hm? It really
is hopeless.
I forgot to
factor in
your idiocy.”

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Shido? I will...

Afterword

**“I will see for myself exactly
how powerful the famed
Princess is.”**

Ellen Mira Mathers

The strongest Wizard



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Tempest Yamai

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Illustrated by
Tsunako


New York

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Date A Live 05

Tempest Yamai

Koushi Tachibana

Translation by Jocelyne Allen Cover art by Tsunako

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Spirit

A uniquely catastrophic creature existing in a parallel world. Cause of occurrence and reason for existence unknown. Creates a spacequake and inflicts serious damage on her surroundings whenever she appears in this world. A very powerful fighter.

Strategy No. 1

Annihilate with force. This approach is very difficult, since the Spirit is extremely powerful, as noted above.

Strategy No. 2

...Date her and make her all weak in the knees.

Tempest Yamai

Spirit No. 8
Astral Dress — Berserk
Weapon — Bow Type [Raphael]

Prologue

Counterattack

“...Why is this happening?” Shido muttered, despair in his heart, and blinked as he reviewed his current situation.

He saw two girls before him. One was willful, her bright hair tied back. The corners of her adorable mouth turned up slightly, and a daring smile spread across her beautiful face. His eyes traced the figure of her slender body from the base of her neck to the pop of her collarbone, and it aroused in him somehow the desire to protect her, which seemed very much at odds with her audacious behavior.

“Keh-keh...Shido. What troubles your heart? You merely need to choose your master. Which is me. Kaguya Yamai. Do so, and I shall grant you your every wish, hmm?” The girl—Kaguya—stretched out a graceful hand like an actor playing a part and nudged Shido’s chin up. This simple gesture sent an electric current shooting through Shido’s brain.

But that was not the end of it.

The other girl’s face was so much like Kaguya’s that she could have been her doppelgänger. Hair twisted in a braid, somehow listless eyes. Her body projected a sensuality that unconsciously drew the eye.

“Temptation. Shido, choose me—Yuzuru—over Kaguya. I will show you pleasures Kaguya’s meager body couldn’t possibly.” She stroked Shido’s cheeks with a fingertip, and the sultriness of it made Shido freeze unconsciously.

“Hah... Stop right there. Your paltry offering is only troubling Shido.”

“Scorn. Knowing you can’t win with a frontal attack, you come pick at how I comport myself. Pathetic.”

Kaguya and Yuzuru glared at each other and then turned their eyes on Shido

at the exact same moment as they each extended a hand to him simultaneously.

“Now, Shido.”

“Question. Whom do you choose?”

“Oh, uh, I mean, I don’t know what to say...” Shido took a step back, cold sweat beading on his forehead.

“Then you should say...I am the cuter one, yes?”

“Question. Is Yuzuru...not enough?”

They pressed Shido for an answer, eyes turned up at him.

“Unh...” He was confused and full of questions. He had indeed agreed to tackle the Spirits in order to save them. And yet for some reason, he was currently being tackled *by* said Spirits.

He dodged the question with a vague smile, but that only made the girls reach out to him even more insistently.

“Now. Which of us?”

“Petition. Please make your selection, Shido.”

Chapter 1

DEM Maneuvering

“Now to announce your sentence,” said the man, his voice quiet and solemn.

He was seated with several other men in the SDF Tengu Garrison, and all of them had their eyes on Origami, who stood in the center of the room. Their faces were severe, gazes critical of the girl who had come before them.

But that was only natural. They were in the middle of an investigation into Origami’s scandalous behavior, after all.

“Master Sergeant Origami Tobiichi,” the man directly in front of her—General Kiritani—continued harshly. “You are subject to disciplinary action. You will never touch a Realizer again.”

“.....” She let out a tiny sigh, the look on her face unchanging. She’d been expecting this. The result had been decided before the investigation even started.

For formality’s sake, her direct supervisor, Ryouko Kusakabe, was also in attendance, acting as her counsel, but the board had acknowledged almost none of the points she’d raised. The “investigation” was nothing more than a thin excuse to punish Origami.

And of course it was. Her error had been that serious. Origami had done what she did fully prepared for this conclusion.

If only. If only she could defeat this Spirit—Efreet, the very Spirit who had killed her parents—she didn’t care if she was ever allowed to fight again, which was why she had pulled the trigger that would end her career as a soldier. But she had miscalculated something: Efreet—Kotori Itsuka—was not the true target of her vengeance.

Actually, she wasn’t entirely sure of that yet. But she also couldn’t discount

Shido's desperate plea. He wouldn't have risked his life to lie to her. If what he said was true and there had been another Spirit present five years ago, Origami was, in this very moment, losing her chance to go after the real killer.

Her heart was very rarely moved, but this cut her to the core.

"...?"

The door opened abruptly, and the men all looked in that direction.

"We're in the middle of conducting a hearing here. I said no one is to—," Kiritani started, frowning, but stopped when he saw the face of the intruder. "Mr. Westcott?"

He sounded so doubtful, the look on his face so suspicious, that Origami felt compelled to turn toward the door.

Accompanied by a girl who looked to be his secretary, the man standing there was tall and dressed in a jet-black suit, with dark ash-blond hair and eyes as sharp as knives. He couldn't have been older than thirty-five, but he had a mysterious air that made him seem far wiser than his years.

Origami's eyebrows twitched the slightest bit.

DEM Managing Director Sir Isaac Ray Pelham Westcott. For all intents and purposes, the head of the world's only Realizer manufacturer.

"Oh, you were in the middle of something. So sorry," Westcott said in fluent Japanese as he looked around the room and shrugged affably.

"Wh-what are you doing...?" Kiritani stuttered, baffled.

Westcott turned his eyes on the general. "Oh, I heard that Mana went down after we took the trouble of sending you White Licorice. I was planning a trip to Japan anyway, so I thought I might drop by and offer her some words of encouragement. But then I heard something rather interesting."

"Interesting?" Kiritani arched an eyebrow.

The younger man nodded theatrically. "A member of your AST activated White Licorice and fought a Spirit."

"...!" Kiritani gasped.

With good reason. DW-029 White Licorice, the weapon of total annihilation Origami had taken without permission, was an experimental DEM model, the crystallization of top-secret technological innovations. Setting aside the fact that this equipment was technically difficult to use, the only person with permission to operate it was Mana, who had been transferred to the AST from DEM.

“You mustn’t jump to conclusions.” Westcott shook his head with a dramatic flair, as if he had read the general’s mind. “I don’t intend to reproach you for that or take advantage of this scandal to make demands of you.”

“Then what?”

“Pure curiosity. I simply wondered what kind of wizard managed to ride that wild stallion, even if only for a brief moment. Well.” Westcott turned his gaze toward Origami. “I didn’t think it would be a girl so lovely as yourself.”

“...” Origami felt something disturbing in that gaze and swallowed hard.

Westcott smiled dryly and shrugged.

General Kiritani cleared his throat. “We will formally apologize for this incident at a later date. We also intend to discipline the master sergeant.”

“What sort of discipline?” Westcott asked.

“After memory processing, we have come to the conclusion that a dismissal would be appropriate,” Kiritani replied curtly.

“What are you talking about?” Westcott heaved a great sigh. “Do you realize how few wizards possess the skill and ability necessary to handle that piece of equipment?”

“...That is not the issue here, sir. This is a matter of military discipline.”

“Ohhh.” Westcott placed a hand on his forehead in an exaggerated gesture as he exhaled. And then he slammed his hand on the table in front of Kiritani and brought his face in very close. “*Do you not understand what I’m hinting at? I’ve said quite enough here.*”

“...!” The officers in the room all gasped.

Isaac Westcott was indeed that influential. But that wasn’t all. This man was

the managing director of DEM. In other words, it was no exaggeration to say that he controlled the world's Realizers, the miraculous technology humanity had obtained thirty years earlier. A piece of "magic" that turned fantasy into reality.

Although it was not public knowledge, every country used Realizers in key institutions. If, hypothetically speaking, DEM decided on a whim not to supply a certain country with Realizers, it would have severe repercussions.

Origami heard General Kiritani gulp loudly. The SDF owed DEM a significant debt. If the general made the wrong decision here and soured Westcott's mood, it would no doubt mean trouble.

However, Kiritani gritted his teeth and hit the table with a fist. "Don't underestimate us, you private sector peacock. The decision will not be overturned. Master Sergeant Tobiichi is discharged." He glared at Westcott.

She could hear the room hold their collective breath. But no one objected to the general's statement. Which was to be expected. They couldn't exactly create a precedent here for senior officers of the SDF to yield to the demands of a foreign manufacturer.

"Wonderful." Westcott met Kiritani's eyes briefly and then exhaled, pulling a smartphone from his jacket's inside pocket to make a call. "Oh, hello. How've you been? Yes, actually, there was something I wished to discuss..."

After a few more words, he handed the phone to Kiritani.

"...? What—?"

"You'll understand once you take the call."

Scowling doubtfully, Kiritani took the device and held it to his ear. "...! Minister of Defense Saeki?!" He flew back in his seat, his face colored with surprise. "Ah... But...! N-no, that's definitely not..." A sheen of sweat formed on his forehead, and a deep furrow was carved between his brows.

When the call was done, he threw the phone at Westcott.

"Ah! Please handle this with more care. It's the latest model."

"...You little...!"

“Heh-heh. Civilian oversight is a marvelous system. No need to take on the brawny types; a matter can be settled simply by befriending a single gentleman.” Westcott tucked the phone back into his inner pocket as he turned up the palms of his hands, encouraging Kiritani to speak.

Kiritani groaned in annoyance. He raised his fist once more and slammed it against the table. “Master Sergeant Origami Tobiichi is sentenced to two months’ suspension!”

“...?!” The eyes of the assembled officers grew wide at this declaration.

Suspension—essentially, the prohibition of Realizer use. Considering what Origami had done, the punishment was unbelievably light.

“General, that’s—”

“...! Quiet. The decision has been made. This hearing is adjourned. Get the hell out of here!”

“But—,” Origami started, but Ryouko stood up, flustered, and took her hand.

“E-excuse us!” She bowed and led Origami out of the room on quick feet.

As they left, Westcott raised his hand slightly in a friendly sort of way, but Origami simply glanced at him and let her superior officer pull her out the door.

Ryouko marched down the hallway with Origami in tow until they were far enough away that their voices wouldn’t carry back into the room. “Origami, you started to say something back there.”

“...However indirectly, the SDF executive submitting to the request of a foreign corpo—,” she began, and Ryouko whacked her on the head.

“How could you?” Origami turned curious eyes on the older woman.

“I could ask you the same thing. What if you said the wrong thing in there and they decided to dismiss you on the spot, damn the consequences?!”

“...That would be a problem,” Origami replied.

Ryouko sighed and ran her hands through her hair. “Then we can just leave it at that. A happy little coincidence. Just think of him like one of God’s angels—one with a grim face. Now you’ll be able to get revenge for your parents, right?”

“...” Origami clenched her hands and nodded.

Ryouko’s expression relaxed. She dipped her head forward and then frowned. “Hmm?” She looked back down the corridor.

Following suit, Origami turned and saw two small heads poking out from where the hallway branched off. She looked at Ryouko, and the two started walking quietly in that direction.

“Wah!” Ryouko shouted, and the two heads bounced up and collapsed on the spot.

“O-ow. What are you doooooing?”

“Hngh! Y-you’re heavy, Mikey.”

The girls were somewhere in their mid-teens. One had her hair tied up in two bunches and was wearing a Raizen High School uniform. The other had blond hair and blue eyes, glasses, and a large white jacket over work clothes.

Private Mikie Okamine and Sergeant First Class Mildred F. Fujimura. Although combat personnel and mechanics had different responsibilities and their own sections, both girls were members of the same AST as Origami and Ryouko. Perhaps because they were close in age, the pair were strangely attached to Origami.

“Mikey and Milly... What are you doing here?” Ryouko asked, arms crossed and eyes narrowed.

The girls straightened up in an instant and began to wave their hands, flustered.

“Oh. Um. You see, um, what was it again, Milly?”

“Wha—?! Don’t toss this hot potato to me!”

Ryouko let out a long sigh. “So you were just worried about Origami... Honestly.”

“Uh. Uhhh...”

“We’re sorry.”

Mikie and Milly seemed apologetic, and their shoulders slumped.

But Mikie quickly lifted her face with a gasp and turned her eyes on Origami. “S-so...? What happened, Origami?!”

Ryouko sighed again, looking exasperated. “Ugh.” She jerked her chin at Origami as if ordering her to answer them.

Origami nodded at Ryouko. “...I was given two months’ suspension.”

“O-oh...” Mikie’s knees buckled under her, and she slumped to the ground. But she quickly shook her head and pulled a brown envelope with *resignation letter* on it from her pocket and threw it to the floor. “And in conclusion, I would like to *résign*...”

“Weird emphasis, Mikey.”

Milly rubbed Mikie’s shoulders as if she were pacifying an animal. “Just calm down and actually think about what Origami said.”

“Huh...? B-but Origami’s got two months’ suspension— Wait! What? Suspension?” Mikie stood up, wiping away the tears in her eyes with her sleeve. “S-suspension? Does that mean you don’t have to quit?!”

“Yes,” Origami replied.

The despair on Mikie’s face turned into sunshine. “Th-that’s great... If you had been discharged, I...I...!” The tears she had just wiped away welled up in her eyes once again. Carried away by emotion, she threw her arms out and leaped toward Origami. “Origamiiiiiiii!”

Origami twisted her body to one side to allow the incoming attack to slip past her and elbowed the other girl in the back of her head. She hadn’t intended to fight, but something deep in her bones instinctively reacted to the charge.

“Plergh?!” With a curious cry, Mikie slammed into the floor facefirst. “O-Origami...”

“...It catches me off guard when you rush forward suddenly.”

“B-but... That was supposed to be our big emotional scene...” Mikie sniffled as she rubbed her bright red nose and forehead.

Eyeing Mikie, Ryouko crouched down and snapped up the brown envelope from the floor. “Hmm. You want to quit the AST? Well, it’ll hurt with us being

short-staffed, but if you've gone to all the trouble of writing a letter, it would be rude to reject your request." She shrugged in an exaggerated manner and sighed.

"What?!" Mikie cried. Her eyes flew wide open, and she hurried over to Ryouko. "Uh. Um! That isn't...!"

"Hmm? What? Something wrong, Mikey?" Ryouko raised an eyebrow. "Oh, sorry for being overly familiar there, Okamine. It's all right. I'm sure you'll have many successes in the future."

"Captain, y-you're getting it all wrong! No!" Mikey reached out to try and take her letter back from Ryouko.

But when she almost had it, Ryouko yanked her hand up, and the envelope shot out of reach.

"Th-this is—this is some kind of mistake!" she wailed. "A plot by an evil organizatioooooon!"

"A mistake? Even though you're the one who wrote it?"

Mikie jumped up and down while Ryouko simply yanked the letter farther up and up. She was clearly playing around. For the ever-serious captain, it was a rare act. But maybe she was trying to release the stress of the hearing they'd just left. Or maybe it was because Mikie was someone no one could resist teasing.

Origami watched over them with her usual expressionless face, and Milly laughed out loud.

"Well, I guess you're both just happy that Origami got by without getting the ax," Ryouko said. "But I can't believe you only got two months' suspension. To be honest, I thought you could only come out of that room with a dishonorable discharge."

Origami wasn't sure how to explain, but then Milly gasped and waved her hands in front of her. "Ngh! N-n-n-n-n-n-no way..."

"Mildred?" Origami asked doubtfully.

Milly ignored this, her cheeks flushing, sweat beading on her forehead. "This

kind of thing is normally a discharge-worthy offense... But your punishment was suspension. An unnaturally light sentence... A dark room... Officers with leering grins... ‘You don’t want to get fired, do you? Then you know what you have to do, don’t you?’ Aah, Origami on all fours in a humiliating outfit, a girlish look she’s never shown anyone—”

“Shush!”

Whap! Ryouko’s fist came down on Milly’s head.



“Eek!” Milly yelped. “Wh-what was that for?! My brain is a valuable asset to humanity, you know!”

“Shut it. Every thought you have leaks right out of your mouth.”

“L-leak...? They wouldn’t actually force her to indulge that kind of fetish—”

Ryouko’s fist slammed into Milly’s head yet again.

“Ow-ow-ow,” Milly moaned. “Honestly, what would you do if you turned me into an idiot?!”

“You’re already there, you sex-crazed perv,” Ryouko said, exasperated, and then tousled Milly’s hair.

Tak, tak. She heard footsteps up ahead in the corridor. When she peered in that direction, she found a man in a black suit and a girl in sunglasses. Isaac Westcott and his secretary.

“...” Ryouko bowed neatly. Seeing this, the others noticed Westcott, too. They stopped fooling around and immediately snapped to attention, zipping up their lips.

“Aah.” Westcott raised an eyebrow as if he had just noticed them. As he walked past Origami, he laid a hand on her shoulder. “I’ve got high hopes for you, young wizard. I’m sure that *you* will be able to destroy the Spirits.”

“...!” Origami swallowed hard. She sensed no hostility or danger. But her heart began to contract faster, pounding at a speed that seemed impossible. Almost as if she felt fear toward the man passing by her.

“Give,” he commanded, and his secretary pulled a small piece of paper from her pocket and handed it to Origami. “Here.”

Origami accepted it wordlessly. The paper was a card with the name I. R. P. WESTCOTT, a series of digits that appeared to be a phone number, and an e-mail address.

“Let me know if you have any problems,” he told her. “Anytime. Deus Ex Machina will spare no expense in *cooperating* with you.”

“...I appreciate that,” she replied quietly as she accepted the business card.

She couldn't meet his eyes.

Perhaps noticing this, Westcott smiled slightly before walking off with his secretary.

"Uh. Um... What was that?"

"Who was he?"

Mikey and Milly cocked their heads to one side in perfect sync.

Ryouko's expression changed from tense to exasperated as she scratched her head and half-closed her eyes. "Mr. Westcott from DEM. Haven't you seen him on TV or in a magazine or anything? And I mean, Mikey is one thing, but Milly, didn't you transfer over from DEM? Why don't you know who he is?"

DEM was the only company in the entire world that made the Realizers that were the key to the CR unit. Consequently, supervisors and mechanical engineers were regularly dispatched from DEM to military and police organizations equipped with Realizers. Milly was one of them.

Milly put a finger to her chin. "Oh, now that you mention it, maybe I've seen him before."

"Now that I mention it? He's technically your boss, isn't he?"

"Ah-ha-ha! Mechanics don't come face-to-face with upper management too much. So long as they shut up and keep shelling out for me and the rest of us, I don't care who's who in that little army of salespeople."

"Someone loves to be controversial." Ryouko smiled dryly.

But Origami wasn't paying any attention to this exchange. She almost glared at the letters and numbers on the business card still in her palm and swallowed hard once more.

Westcott sighed quietly. His shoes clacked against the floor.

"Did you see that, Ellen? They do not understand the magnitude of this. A group of incompetent people came this close to censuring a one-in-a-thousand genius. Simply bizarre."

"Yes, sir," replied the girl walking a few paces behind him—Ellen.

“But to think that an unrefined wizard could move White Licorice! If that Kiritani hadn’t changed his punishment for Origami Tobiichi, we might have welcomed her into our own fold. In that sense, it’s a bit of a disappointment that he did bend the knee.”

“Would we have welcomed her at DEM?”

“Yes. If we processed her properly, she might become a wizard to surpass Mana and Artemisia—or even the world’s most powerful wizard, Ellen Mathers.” Westcott grinned.

“...” The world’s most powerful wizard was silent for a moment. She may have known it was a joke, but it perhaps left a foul taste in her mouth.

Westcott found this unbearably adorable.

“That reminds me,” she said suddenly. “I have a report.” She opened the folder in her hand.

“A report?” he asked.

“Yes. The other day, I was informed that the AAA-rank Spirit—code name Princess—has not been sighted for approximately three months, despite making repeated appearances before that in the Kanto area.”

“Oh, yes, I heard. But that’s not particularly unusual, is it?”

“No. But look at this.” Ellen turned a photograph toward Westcott.

It showed two girls. One was Master Sergeant Origami Tobiichi, whom they had just met, and he was reminded that she was technically a reserve AST member and attended high school when things were under control.

The issue, however, was the other girl.

She was slender, in a uniform of the same design as Origami’s. Her face was beautiful, framed by hair as black as the night hanging down to her waist. Ephemeral crystal eyes that, once seen, would have been impossible to forget.

There was no doubt. No mistake here.

“—Princess?” Westcott murmured as he worked to slow the pounding of his heart.

Yes. Shown in the photo was the very Spirit in question, Princess.

“What is the meaning of this?” he asked, frowning. “Are you saying that the Spirit is attending high school?”

“Her name is Tohka Yatogami,” Ellen told him. “She apparently transferred to Raizen High School at the same time that Princess vanished.”

“And how did the SDF react?”

“It seems Master Sergeant Tobiichi reported a student who was the exact likeness of the Spirit. However, because they could not measure a Spirit reaction, they determined her to be a civilian.”

“And the method of measurement?”

“External measurement with a DS-06.”

“Fools.” Westcott placed a hand on his forehead and sighed. “They measured the one time with a low-precision device meant for use aboard vehicles and then decided it was merely a passing resemblance based on that alone?”

“It appears that way.”

“I’m certain of it now, Ellen. Getting drunk on peace is even more frightening than dementia.”

“I’ll request an immediate reexamination.”

“No. Wait.” Westcott spread his hands to stop her. “If we leave this to the gentle little SDF notables, the most they’ll do is an investigation on par with a health check.”

“So then?”

“We shall do it ourselves. *Independently*. That will get results much faster, and more reliably.”

“But—”

He held up a hand to stop her. He knew what she was going to say.

Given the possibility that this Tohka Yatogami was a Spirit, they would need to muster a force powerful enough to respond when she showed her true colors. But it would be extremely difficult to secretly bring in the personnel and

equipment required to handle an AAA-rank Spirit right under the AST's noses. There was a feast spread out in front of them, but they couldn't even touch it. This was part of the reason Ellen had wanted to make another request of the SDF.

"Can I take a little peek, then?" Westcott pointed at Ellen's hand.

"Sir." She handed him the file, and he flipped through it, the corners of his mouth sliding up.

"Oh-ho! Why, this is excellent timing, isn't it? Say, Ellen, you've gotten a bit rusty recently with no Spirits to keep you on your toes, hmm?"

"....." Her cheeks twitched.

The Spirits were elusive and fickle. They didn't only appear when wizards were fully armed and ready to go. And when the wizards did manage to back the Spirit into a corner, she would be Lost, rendering the whole endeavor pointless.

If they knew her whereabouts in advance, however, the whole process became a lot simpler.

"I'll leave this to you, Ellen Mira Mathers—humanity's peerless wizard. You can do it. Even up against that atrocious, world-shattering Spirit."

"Of course," Ellen replied a beat later. "I never lose, no matter who my opponent is."

That was the expected and anticipated response. Westcott chuckled to himself.



Mana Takamiya opened her eyes slowly with a short sigh. Her field of vision was blurred, as if she were seeing the world through a filter, perhaps because she hadn't used her eyes in a long time. She felt strangely weak, and her whole body ached.

"Where...am I...?"

For a moment, she didn't recognize the voice as hers. Dry throat, ringing ears. That was more than enough to give her pause, and she thought—fleetingly,

idiotically—maybe her brain didn't remember the sound of her voice.

After a few minutes, she regained control of her body more or less and took a look around to figure out where she was and what was going on.

White room. Large bed. Bandages wrapped around every part of her, IV stabbed into her left hand, oxygen mask covering her mouth. Electrodes were attached to her chest, and a monitor pinged in time with her heartbeat.

Mana half grinned. With all this gear, she could be a model for a patient in critical condition.

“Why am I so...?” she started, and then her eyes flew open wide. She ripped the oxygen mask off and sat her aching body up. She turned her head and glanced at the digital clock on the shelf.

2:00 PM. 7/5 WED

“It's...July...fifth?!”

Mana gasped. Unless the clock was wrong or someone had deliberately changed the date to mess with her, nearly a month had passed since the day she fought Nightmare—Kurumi Tokisaki—on the roof of Raizen High School. Since the day Mana had been utterly crushed by the *real* Kurumi, who manifested the Angel.

Shido, Tohka, and Origami had been there as well. She couldn't imagine that they had been able to turn that terrible situation around by themselves. And that meant... In other words...

“My brother!” She yanked herself free of the electrodes on her chest and the needle in her arm. The EKG began beeping in distress.

And then she finally realized something very basic.

“Why...am I not dead...?”

True, her body ached. Yes, her vision was hazy. She would have been hard pressed to say that she was anywhere close to tip-top shape.

But she was alive. Mana had been exposed to that people-eating Nightmare at her most helpless, her most defenseless, and yet she continued to exist.

Now she was even less certain of what had happened that day. At the point where she lost consciousness, the battle had reached its horrible climax. The roof had been filled with Kurumi avatars, and behind them all sat her time-controlling Angel.

Anyone could have seen at a glance that the situation was dire. Mana found it hard to believe that anyone in this world possessed enough power to beat back that black tide.

But how else could she explain the fact that she was alive? Unless that twisted girl let her go on a whim or for revenge or something.

Mana put a hand on her throbbing head. Although she'd survived, she had no idea if the others had come to harm or not. What had happened to them?

"...Huh?" Mana frowned.

The door to her room had opened, and several people in black suits were now stepping inside.

"Mana Takamiya, yes?"

"Is this someone's idea of a joke?" Mana's gaze grew sharp. "Doctors and nurses in black, hmm?"

The men in black did not so much as flinch.

"You'll be coming with us. I'd rather not do this the hard way, but that isn't out of the question if you resist."

"...Uh?" Her face scrunched in doubt, and she glared at the man who had spoken. "Do you realize who you're speaking with? The hard way? With *me*? Ha! Go ahead if you think you can."

Mana stood up and cracked her knuckles.

"Ms. Takamiya, is something the matter?" the nurse asked, opening the door. The moment she peered inside, she froze in place. "What...?"

She had come to check in on Mana Takamiya after noticing an irregularity in her EKG reading, but there was no one in the room.

Oxygen mask, electrodes, and IV needle were scattered on the rumpled bed,

and there was a faint indentation in the mattress indicating that someone had been lying there recently.

But when she scanned the room and even checked under the bed, her supposedly unconscious patient was nowhere to be found.

The nurse hurried to the head of the bed and pressed the CALL button.



“We’re free...”

When the familiar sound of the bell ringing echoed through the school, Shido Itsuka fell forward onto his desk, the last drop of his strength gone. He couldn’t see it himself, but he would bet anything that plumes of smoke were wafting up from his head.

Which was honestly no surprise. Shido had just finished challenging one of the greatest enemies to be faced in school life: the final exam.

“Okay, okaaaay! No collapsing yet. Please pass your papers forward!” called the short, bespectacled teacher from the podium as she clapped her hands. His homeroom teacher, Tamae Okamine, or Tama for short.

The class rose like zombies and handed their tests to the students in the seats in front of them. Shido felt like the zombie ratio among his classmates was higher than usual, but this, too, was reasonable.

It might have been the standard final examination on the usual range of subjects, but the students attending this school had been hospitalized en masse until only a few days earlier.

At the end of the previous month, the students and staff at Raizen High School had suddenly all fallen unconscious. After closing down the school to conduct a thorough investigation of the gas lines, the building materials, and any possible foreign matter generating noxious fumes, the school had reopened, but the final exam schedule remained mercilessly the same as it had been preclosure.

“...Hmm?” He was about to hand the stack of tests with his own on top toward the front when he caught sight of the girl sitting to his right. Like Shido, she had flopped down on her desk a moment earlier. “Tohka, you okay?”

“M-mm...” Tohka slowly raised her head.

“How was it?”

“M-mm, okay, I guess.” She waved her hand, an exhausted look on her face.

For the midterms, she had just scribbled on her answer sheet (and Reine had intervened to keep her from failing), but once Shido told her what the tests were for, she started studying on her own. Apparently, she didn’t like that Shido had been studying for the exams while she sat there doing nothing.

Ratatoskr encouraged this sort of self-motivated action from Tohka, and they’d held a study party at the Itsukas’ house five days before finals. The unfamiliar act of studying, however, had chipped away at her strength. An hour after the study session began, she’d developed a fever—a literal burning for knowledge.

“All right, that’s the end of the exams for the first term. Nice work, everyone!” Tama announced, and the class sighed in both joy and relief. “But we still have some decisions to make, so you can’t go home yet, okay?” She tidied the bundle of answer sheets and left the classroom.

“Shido...” Tohka—ragged—staggered up from her seat. “I’m gonna go get a drink of water.”

“S-sure. You okay?”

“Mm... Don’t worry. I’m just a little tired.” She cut across the classroom on unsteady feet, opened the door, and stepped into the corridor.

“Ha-ha! Well, she did work really hard.” Shido watched her leave and leaned back in his seat. And then his eyebrows twitched upward.

The reason was simple. He could see the girl sitting to his left out of the corner of his eye.

She was pale with a pin in her shoulder-length hair. He couldn’t see her face because it was turned to the left, toward the window, but he could say with certainty that there wasn’t a hint of anything that could be called an expression on it.

Origami Tobiichi. Shido’s classmate and a member of the Spirit-hunting AST.

“...Unh.” He unconsciously screwed up his face. It wasn’t like she was doing anything, but his heart throbbed nonetheless.

Shido hadn’t spoken to Origami once since the major commotion last month. And now he felt like he’d somehow let the opportunity slip past, missing his chance to talk to her. He made up his mind at this moment.

“O-Origami.”

Her shoulders twitched, and she looked over at him. “—What?” she said in her usual monotone voice.

For some reason, he was just a little relieved to see her like this. But then silence fell between them.

“Uh. Um.” He couldn’t say nothing forever.

He had been about to ask what happened to her after that day on the roof. But he couldn’t talk about that in class, not where all their classmates could eavesdrop.

Fortunately, they had a little time before their final homeroom, and Tohka was still out on her quest for water. Shido swallowed hard before opening his mouth once more.

“Origami. You want to go someplace where we can be alone?”

“...!” Her shoulders jumped up. “A place? Where we can be...*alone*?” she asked, breaking the question up into pieces for some reason.

“Yeah. Like on the stairs, where we talked before, or—”

“Come.” She stood, grabbed Shido’s hand, and started walking.

“U-uh, Origami?”

Ignoring him, she headed deeper into the school without so much as glancing at the stairs leading to the roof. She was headed for a girls’ bathroom at the end of the hall.

“Uh. Hold up!” Shido just barely managed to yank his hand away.

“What?” Origami cocked her head to one side. “No one comes here during exams. It’s too far from the classroom.”

“Okay, that might be true, but still!”

“It’s fine.”

“Hey! Stop—no, seriously, where are you taking me?!”

His struggle was futile. Origami jerked on his hand to lead him to a stall at the end of the row and locked the door.

“...Umm.” Shido felt his cheeks grow hot as he faced Origami in a space clearly not designed for two.

She began to wriggle and squirm in the corner of his eye.

“Origami, what are you—?” he started and then gasped.

A reasonable response. Just as he wondered if Origami had actually stuck her hands down the sides of her skirt, white underwear dropped halfway down her legs.

“Hey! Whoa! Stop! If you have to go, I’ll wait outside!”

“...?” Origami raised an eyebrow in surprise.

But then she clapped her hands like she understood something, pulled her underwear back up, and squatted down. She reached out and started to undo his metal belt buckle.

“Eep!” He gasped and grabbed her arms, stunned. “What are you doing?! What are you *doing*?!”

“...? Why else did you bring me here?”

“*You brought me here?!* ” he shouted, half crying. He stopped and took several deep breaths. “I...I just wanted to talk about what happened last month.”

“...Oh.” The look on Origami’s face was one of understanding and disappointment.

“...What did you think I was going to do?”

“I—”

“Actually, you-know-what-don’t-tell-me-sorry-I-asked.”

“Oh.” Origami stood up and looked at his face. “I was suspended for two

months at the hearing.”

“Huh?”

“You know, afterward.”

“Suspended...? You didn’t have to quit the AST?!” Shido cried out in surprise, and Origami nodded. “Then you didn’t get fired?”

He put a hand to his chest and breathed a sigh of relief. Origami’s eyebrows moved very minutely.

“What’s with that reaction?”

“Oh. Well... Right, I guess. Why, huh?” He scratched his head, puzzled. He didn’t want Origami to fight the Spirits. He would have preferred it if she could leave the AST entirely. But for some reason, when she told him she was still in, he had been a little relieved.

“—I’m not convinced yet,” she told him, and he gasped.

“...!”

He understood in an instant what she was trying to say.

“The Spirit of flames, Efreet. You said she wasn’t the Spirit that killed my parents. But you have no definitive proof.”

“... I...”

Origami had joined the AST to strike down the Spirit who killed her parents. And then last month, she finally caught sight of this Spirit. Shido’s little sister, Kotori.

Naturally, Origami had thrown away everything, even violating the laws and regulations of the AST to come after Kotori and kill her.

But Shido had gotten his memories back. Visions of the city enveloped in flames five years ago—and the presence of another Spirit on the scene.

“Maybe I don’t. But...I need you to trust me. I swear I’m not ly—”

“Don’t get the wrong idea. It’s not that I don’t trust you, Shido. I want to believe you. In fact...I want what you said to be true.”

“Huh...?”

“If I can avoid it, I’d rather not kill your sister.”

“Origami...” Shido opened his eyes wide for a second before clenching his hands into fists and bowing a little. “Thanks.”

“I should be thanking you.” She turned her eyes away from him again.

Shido frowned, not sure what she meant by that.

She slowly lifted her gaze again and said somewhat hesitantly, “I appreciate it... You talking to me like normal.”

“...Oh, uh, you—”

“I tried to kill your sister. And I nearly killed *you* three months ago.”

“...” Shido got a sour look on his face and scratched his head. “I mean...I’m not about to say we’re all good there. But I still want us to hang out, Origami. Is that not okay?”

She showed a moment’s hesitation before shaking her head from side to side.

“Mm.” He crossed his arms. “Okay then. We should be getting back to class. Homeroom’s starting soon.”

“—Wait. There’s one last thing I want to ask.”

“Hmm? What?” he asked, turning around.

She stared hard at his face. “—Shido. Are you human?”

“...!” He was speechless. But he should have anticipated the question.

“I’ve thought it strange for a while now,” she continued. “I know I shot you that day. But a few days later, you came to school, completely fine. And there’s what happened at the amusement park, too.”

The amusement park. The place where Origami attacked Kotori. Shido had sealed Kotori’s Spirit power and used the regeneration ability he got from her. And then he had told Origami:

“Kotori—my little sister—is a human being! It’s Efreteet you want to kill, right? Then shoot me! Right now, I’m Efreteet!”

“Ngh...” Thinking about it now, Shido realized he’d been reckless. Although he’d had no other choice, he had spilled his secret to her, a member of the AST, a group that was dedicated to hunting down Spirits.

Perhaps reading his mind from the look on his face, Origami spoke again without waiting for Shido’s response. “Don’t worry. I didn’t report it.”

“You didn’t?” he asked, and Origami nodded immediately. “But why...?”

“I can’t pass along unproven information. In the event you are determined to be a Spirit, it’s possible that there will be an order to eliminate you.”

“...!” His heart started beating wildly. The order to eliminate. That could only mean one thing—the AST, those modern wizards clad in mechanical armor, would summon every ounce of strength at their disposal to kill Shido.

But this made perfect sense. He had sealed the Spirit’s powers, and he was using them, albeit at a fraction of their true potential. It wouldn’t be a surprise if they considered him a Spirit by association.

However...

“I’m...human. At least, I think I am.” He ended up using the same words as Kotori, not on purpose, but because there was nothing else he could say.

“Oh.”

“...Do you believe me?”

“I told you. I want to believe you.” Origami glanced at his face and continued, “If the time comes when you can talk to me, I want to hear the details.”

“...Sorry. Thanks,” he said, and she opened the stall door and left the bathroom.

A second later, Shido realized he had been left alone in an extremely dangerous location, and he hastily fled after her, whipping his head around to make sure no one was watching.

Once outside, he started down the hallway after Origami, back to the classroom.

“...Shido?”

He heard Tohka's dubious voice from behind and jumped a few centimeters from the ground.

"T-Tohka..."

She looked doubtfully back and forth between Shido and Origami before continuing, her face severe, "Why did you and Origami Tobiichi come out of the girls' bathroom?"

"Ngh!" Instantly, he started to perspire. She had seen everything. "Uh... Oh, that was... Um..." He tried to explain, but he could see other students in the area. He couldn't say the wrong thing.

"..." Still silent, Origami gave Shido a *look*.

"What was that just now?!" Tohka cried. "What exactly were you doing?!"

"Not telling. It's our little secret." Origami raised her index finger and brought it up in front of her nose in a comical gesture that was very unlike her.

"Wh-what?!" Tohka shouted and glared at Shido. "Shido! What were you doing?!"

"Huh?! Uh... Oh, right." He scratched his head. He didn't mind telling Tohka, but he couldn't really bring himself to talk in front of their classroom with almost forty people jammed inside. "...Sorry, I'll tell you later."

"!!"

He could practically see his words hit her. She collapsed on the spot.

"T-Tohka!"

"Aaaah! Aaaaaah... Why? Why can Origami Tobiichi know and not me...?" she moaned, gritting her teeth.

"C-calm down! I promise! We'll talk for real later!" He knelt down and pleaded with her, waving his hands emphatically.

"R-really?"

"Really! Promise!"

Tohka finally lifted her anxious-looking face.

“...He can’t tell you. Not after he did *that* to me,” Origami said in a flat voice.

“Sh-Shido...?” Tohka’s eyes grew wide in shock. “What on earth did you...?”

Their classmates were starting to whisper now.

“Whoa... Itsuka’s the worst.”

“I’ve never seen Tobiichi look like that.”

“And in the middle of the school day?”

“Even though he’s already got Tohka...?”

“Dammit. Damn him...”

“So the basic recipe for poison is an acid and a base, right?”

“Play Hymn Number 13 right now.”

“I didn’t do anything! Also, those last few comments were insanely shady!” Shido raised his voice in self-defense. But all eyes remained firmly focused on him.

He heard the classroom door opening from behind, and Ms. Tama appeared.

“Okay, enough. Everyone, take your seats. It’s time for homeroom.”

A godsend.

“S-see, Tohka?! We better sit! And everyone else should, too!” Shido shouted, louder than necessary, and set off in the lead to his desk.

His classmates looked like they had more to say, but they were forced to hold their tongues and return to their seats now that the teacher had returned.

“...You have to tell me everything later,” Tohka told him as she, too, sat down.

Ms. Tama let out a giggle. “Oh my, you looked like you were having fun. What were you all doing?”

“Oh, nothing...,” Shido said, feeling hot.

“Iiiiinteresting.” Tama laughed happily from her place in front of the podium. “It’s the last period of the day. But there’s something we have to decide on before we leave.”

“Ummm! What are we deciding?” Tonomachi held his hand up high.

“Roommate arrangements and seating on the flight for the school trip,” Tama announced.

“...Oh,” Shido muttered.

Now that she mentioned it, the school trip to Okinawa was coming up in mid-July, right before summer break. With the group coma incident on top of finals and all the Spirit stuff, he’d forgotten about one of the biggest events of student life.

It seemed that he wasn’t the only one. About a third of the class joined Shido in nodding. “Oh, riiiiight.”

“Ha-ha-ha! You’re all so forgetful. Okay then, let’s get right to— Whoops! I just remembered.” Tama’s eyebrows shot up as something apparently came to mind, and she pulled a stack of papers out from where they were wedged in her attendance book. “First things first. There’s been a bit of a change in where we’re going.”

“*Huh?*” went the entire class.

There were only two weeks left before the trip. Destinations didn’t just change at the last minute for no reason.

“Mm.” Tama nodded. “Well, that’s exactly what’s happened.”

“Umm, so then where are we going?” Tonomachi was asking the hard questions once again.

The class was curious as to *why* their destination had suddenly been changed, but the *where* was their biggest concern.

They were originally supposed to go to Okinawa. Blue ocean, white beaches, the travel mecca of coral, gentle welcomes of “*mensore*,” and munching on baked goods like *sata andagi* donuts and *chinsuko*. More than a few girls had bought new swimsuits specifically for the occasion. If they learned that their trip would be bringing them to some landlocked prefecture, a riot wasn’t out of the question.

Sensing this ominous aura, Tama spoke at a slightly higher pitch than usual. “I-

it's okay. The new place is also wonderful.”

“And where's that?”

“Let's see... Arubi Island.”

Half the class groaned, while the other half looked confused.

“Arubi? That's by Izu, right?”

“That's not a real destination. A downgrade.”

“Hey. It's not bad for a tourist spot.”

“Okay! Quiet, please.” Tama clapped her hands to interrupt the sudden chatter.

The class quickly came to the general consensus—“Well, at least they didn't totally scrap a trip to the beach”—and followed their teacher's instruction.

“We'll go through it in detail once the revised itinerary is done, so we'll settle on roommates for now. Please form groups of four or five with whoever you like.”

They all sent their eyes racing around the room before standing up, chairs clattering, and forming groups with their friends.

Tonomachi walked over to Shido. “Hey, Itsuka, you and me—”

“Shido!”

But he was drowned out by a shout from Shido's right.

Tohka was leaning across her desk, eyes shining. “Let's team up for this roommate thing!”

“Uh... Uh?” He frowned.

“Mm?” Tohka gave him a quizzical look, like she couldn't understand why Shido was surprised. “Is something wrong?”

“Uh, actually, that would be a really bad idea.”

“Why? It's groups of five, right? So there's no problem.”

“N-no, Yatogami!” Tama shouted from the podium. “Girls and boys should form separate groups!”

“Mmph.” Tohka pouted. “Why? I want to be with Shido.”

“Wh-why...? It’s...,” Tama stammered, her face turning beet red.

Shido sighed and turned toward Tohka. “I told you not to give the teacher a hard time. Anyway, boys and girls have to be in separate rooms.”

“Mm. They do?” Tohka slumped for a moment, but she quickly lifted her face with a gasp. “I know!”

She ran out of the classroom and slammed the door shut. He heard the rattling of a locker from the hallway. A minute or so later, the door opened again, and Tohka came waltzing in. Wearing track pants instead of a skirt, her long hair tied back.

“...Tohka?” Shido asked.



“No. I—I am To...To...Toru,” Tohka replied, deliberately lowering her voice. “As you can see, Ms. Tama, I’m a boy starting now. There shouldn’t be any more problems.”

“There’s a huge problem!” Tama shrieked, seeming at her wit’s end.

“Mm.” Tohka drooped, looking utterly exhausted. “So this won’t work, either, then.”

“Wait.” An unexpected person threw Tohka a lifeline—Origami.

“I want you to accept Tohka Yatogami’s request. Be flexible, please.”

“Wh-what?!” Tama looked stunned at this from Origami, who fought like cats and dogs with Tohka. And it wasn’t just their teacher. Everyone who witnessed the girls’ daily squabbles was shocked.

“You... What’s your endgame?” Tohka stared at Origami, eyes narrowed in open suspicion.

“Your commitment and persistence have made a deep impression on me. You have earned the right to be in a boys’ room.”

After a few seconds, Tohka snorted and averted her eyes. “I-I’m not thanking you!”

“No need,” Origami said.

“H-hey, hey, hey! What are the two of you talking about here?! You can’t just decide that!” Tama banged the podium with her fist.

Origami paid this no heed. “However, if you’re going on the school trip as a boy, then you’ll have to obey the rules.”

“Rules?”

“Yes. The toilet, the bath—you’ll do everything together with the boys.”

“Wha...?!” Tohka turned beet red.

“Whoa...?!” The boys were suddenly very interested. The girls glared at them.

“Having people stare at you or touching you on some kind of impulse will all be within bounds,” Origami continued. “Because you are a boy, after all.”

“Wh-wh-wh-wha...?” Tohka’s hands shook, and she glared at Origami, about to burst into tears.

Origami ignored this and turned her gaze on Shido. “However, it’s not often that a girl becomes a boy. There needs to be a proper balance.”

“Huh?” Shido frowned. “What’s that mean?”

“Given that the number of boys has increased, it’s only reasonable for you to become a girl, Shido.”

“That doesn’t make any sense!”

“Let’s go to the bathroom together, Shidomi.”

“That’s my new name?!” he shouted.

Since this was coming from an honors student, the rest of the class started giving the idea some serious thought.

Tohka put a hand to her chin as she considered the proposal, and then her eyes flew open. “Wait a second! If Shido becomes a girl, then we wouldn’t be able to share a room, now would we?!”

“Live strong as a boy. I’m excited for you.”

“Unnngh! You set me up, Origami Tobiichi!”

“Aah! Calm down!” Shido shouted. “Girls and boys are in separate rooms! No switching!”

The two girls finally fell silent.

Seeing this tentative conclusion, Tama heaved a sigh of relief.

However...

“W-well, you might not be able to share a room, but you can sit next to whoever you want on the plane,” she noted entirely unnecessarily. “So you could always sit together, right?”

Tohka’s and Origami’s eyes began to glitter once more.

Chapter 2

Cyclone Girls

“School trip? Oh, I heard about that. Okinawa, right?” Kotori Itsuka responded to her subordinate’s report as she flicked the stick of the Chupa Chups in her mouth on the bridge of *Fraxinus*.

Her long hair was tied up in two black ribbons, and she had a red jacket on. Eyes round like walnuts. A face with a touch of childish innocence. She was a small girl who seemed out of place on the bridge of an airship.

“...No, there was a sudden change. They’re going to Arubi Island now,” said a woman in a military uniform—Reine Murasame. Her head was wobbling, and there were prominent bags under her eyes.

“A change? At this stage? Why?”

“...Mm. About a month ago, an agency called Cross Travel got in touch with Raizen High. They apparently selected the school at random for some kind of promotion. The agency offered to cover all the costs of the trip to the island on the condition that they can take photos for the pamphlet.”

“Hmm, that’s pretty generous. But would the school really change their destination at the last minute? I mean, they booked accommodations and everything, right?”

“...Apparently, the hotel they had planned on staying at suddenly collapsed. And then this offer came in, so the school jumped on it.”

“Collapsed?” Kotori furrowed her brow. This story was more violent than expected.

“...Yes. I don’t know the details yet, but it looks like the building’s old age was the primary cause.”

“Mm-hmm... Well, I do get the feeling that the timing here is a little too

convenient. But..." Kotori shrugged. "I guess if the school's fine with it, then that's fine. And it's a good opportunity for you to stretch out your legs, Reine."

Reine Murasame was the analyst for the Ratatoskr organization, but she was also the assistant homeroom teacher for Raizen High School's Grade 11, Class 4. She was supposed to go along on the class trip as a chaperone.

Reine dropped her head and groaned.

"What's wrong?" Kotori asked.

"...Oh, I hope I'm just overthinking things. But when I ran a check on this company, Cross Travel, I learned it's likely they're affiliated with DEM Industries."

"What?" Kotori screwed up her face.

Deus Ex Machina Industries. One of the world's leading corporations, headquartered in the UK, and the sole company able to produce Realizers, outside of Asgard Electronics, one of Ratatoskr's parent organizations. A group whose philosophy was the polar opposite of Ratatoskr and Kotori, who were trying to peacefully lock away the power of the Spirits. In other words, they were actively pursuing the complete annihilation of the Spirits.

"Something smells fishy." Kotori flicked her Chupa Chups stick up, and the crease between her eyebrows grew more pronounced.

Among the people at Raizen High School going on the class trip were Shido and Tohka. They would do well to consider the worst-case scenario and prepare for it.

"It's probably a coincidence, but let's have *Fraxinus* go along just in case. We'll want assets in place if things come to a head. Maybe it'll end up being a vacation for us, too."

"...Mm, right. That's probably a good idea. If anything does happen, I'll contact you from the ground. You can stay on standby until then."

"How long's the trip again?"

"...Two nights and three days from the seventeenth of July."

"Gah. Seriously? I'm supposed to make an appearance at the head office that

day. Not ideal.” Kotori frowned and put a hand to her chin, and a tall man appeared with a *fwsh* from behind her.

Fraxinus Vice Commander Kyouhei Kannazuki snapped his thumb up and smiled. His almost unpleasantly white teeth gleamed.

“Well, this is no good,” Kotori continued, without so much as a glance at him. “What are we going to do?”

“...Hmm. You can’t go another day?”

“Don’t think so,” Kotori said. “Rounds all coming together in person. That maybe happens once a year.”

Kannazuki took a step forward and struck a dramatic pose, like the flourish at the end of a gymnastics routine. For some reason, Kotori could practically see sound effects like *ba-daaam* or *whd-whd-whd-whd-whd-whd-whd-whd* behind him.

“...I suppose that makes sense. In that case...”

“Yes. I’ll have to leave someone else in charge of the ship. I’d prefer that to be you, Reine.”

“...But I’ll be accompanying them directly. And we can’t lose our contact on the ground.”

“That’s true. Who else is available?” Kotori murmured with a sigh.

Kannazuki spun in front of them and spread his arms out elegantly, like a balletic swan.

“Ugh.” Kotori glared at him.

“Particle beam eyes?!” He did a somersault and collapsed on the spot.

“What are you skulking around for?” she snarled. “Could you practice your dance routine someplace else?”

“No, no, no, no, what are you saying? From what I hear, you’re currently searching for someone to replace you and take care of *Fraxinus* during Shido’s school trip, Commander.” Kannazuki threw his hands out. “Is there another besides myself who could carry out this important mission?! No! That was

obviously a rhetorical question!”

“In that case, I guess it’d be Mikimoto or Kawagoe,” Kotori said.

“...I’m not so sure,” Reine replied. “They’re excellent crew members, but when it comes to taking command...”

“Abandonment kink! Is that what this is?” Kannazuki began to pant.

He was being annoying, so Kotori turned her eyes back on him with a click of her tongue. “I heard you really made a mess of things the last time I was gone?”

“I’ll be fine! That was just the big bang of my agape for you, Commander! But have no fear! There shall be no problems this time! I will carefully watch over this chapter of Shido’s youth!”

“...Reine.”

“...Well, I’ll be on the ground, too. It’ll probably be okay.”

Kotori sighed as if to clear away the anxiety swirling in her heart.



Monday, July 17. After about three hours on the airplane, Shido and the eleventh graders from Raizen High School landed on an island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean.

“Wh-whoa...!” Stepping out of the airport, Tohka’s eyes grew wide, and her hands trembled.

This was perfectly understandable. The view that greeted them was so vast that it was impossible to take in unless she physically turned her head from side to side.

The ocean spread out on the other side of the road, past the sandy beach, and the horizon in the distance divided heaven and earth. The sky was a clear blue. The sun shone brilliantly, and a beautiful gradation colored the ocean water.

“Th-this is...the sea?!” Tohka shouted and threw her arms out as if to try and measure its size.

Of course, the Pacific was not small enough to be completely contained by

her wingspan. Seeming even more excited, she whirled around, her small frame trembling.

“Ha-ha... You’re pretty excited, huh?” Shido grinned at her somewhat over-the-top gestures. On further thought, he realized that it was possible she had never seen the ocean in person before.

They had just set foot on Arubi Island. A total area of seventy square kilometers nestled in between Izu and Ogasawara Islands. The northern part had been gouged out during the series of spacequakes thirty years ago and redeveloped in recent years as a new tourist destination. It was a place with a history very similar to where Shido and his friends lived, Tengu City.

The northern district, arranged into perfect grids, was equipped with the full array of disaster countermeasures, in line with other redeveloped areas. Additionally, the shore that had been cleanly cut away by the spacequake was so unusual and strangely beautiful that it had become a popular travel destination for tourists from Japan and many other countries as well.

Of course, considering the victims who had lost their lives in the spacequakes, this was perhaps a little tasteless. But it was no exaggeration to say that this island and its declining population had managed to revitalize itself as a major tourist attraction because of the tragedy.

“Hmm.” Although he couldn’t quite match Tohka’s excitement, Shido wasn’t so emotionally detached that he felt nothing when taking in the magnificent view. He looked around and stretched as he took deep breaths. And then yawned abruptly. “Aaaah. Oops.”

His eyelids were strangely heavy—perhaps owing to their early departure. On the plane, too, he had very nearly fallen asleep. Well, that said, though...

He sighed as he glanced at Tohka still waving her hands in excitement and Origami coming out of the airport.

Fortunately—or maybe not—the plane seats were in groups of three, so they’d managed to reach an accord with Shido in the middle and the girls on either side of him, but...

“Shido, look. It’s so pretty.”

“Shido! This side’s pretty, too! Wait! The window’s far away! You did this on purpose, didn’t you, Origami Tobiichi?!”

“It’s your fault for not asking for the window seat.”

“Hnnnngh...”

“Shido. Look. You can see the horizon.”

“Ngh! Sh-Shido! Over here, I mean, you know! It’s amazing! The aisle is super cool! This is something you’re not gonna get from a horiz-a-whatever!”

“Look. You can see the mountains in the distance. Come closer.”

“Ngh! Th-this way, I mean...! Shido, look! Huge mountains on Reine’s chest!”

“We broke through the clouds. Look. A sea of white. Like a carpet.”

“Th-this way, there’s... Uh-ungaaaah!”

With this constant chatter being played in stereo surround sound, he couldn’t have slept even if he’d tried.

“Mm?” Tohka made a strange sound and whirled her head around.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“...Oh, I just felt like something or someone was watching us.”

“Huh?” Shido cocked his head to the side. He heard a *snap*, and then they were suddenly bathed in the light of a flash.

He unconsciously covered his face with his hand. “Whoa!” He narrowed his dazzled eyes and looked in the direction of the light to find a girl standing there with a large camera.

Pale blond hair fluttering in the wind. He recalled the phrase *Nordic blond*, though he wasn’t sure if that was accurate. Her white skin stood out in this crowd, and her sharp features were definitely not Asian.

“Um. What was that?” Shido asked, bewildered.

“Apologies.” The girl lowered her camera and turned her gaze on him. “I’m Ellen Mathers, the photographer sent from Cross Travel to accompany you. I’ll be keeping a record of your trip for the next three days. I’m sorry for the candid

shot. If that was rude, I do apologize.”

“Uh, no, it’s fine.”

Now that she mentioned it, he vaguely remembered that someone had mentioned a photographer would be on the trip with them. He never dreamed it would be a foreigner—and a girl not much different in age from Shido and his classmates. Shido and Tohka stared at her.

“Well, if you’ll excuse me.” Ellen bowed once more and walked toward the other students.

“What’s her deal?” Tohka crossed her arms.

“Dunno,” he said. “But that explains why you felt like someone was watching you.”

“Mm. Mm-hmm.” Tohka looked to both sides before peering upward. “I still feel like there’s eyes on me, though.”

“Huh?” He frowned and turned his eyes in the direction she was looking, but there was nothing there except the clear blue sky, looking as if it were celebrating the arrival of Shido and his classmates.



“Incoming from Adeptus One. The target has landed on the island.”

“Camera six, north sector, Akaru Airport. Target confirmed.”

“Confirmed here as well. It’s Princess.”

As the voices rose from the lower deck of the bridge, a girl was shown on the monitor. A girl who looked exactly the same as the AAA-rank Spirit—code name Princess.

“Hmm...”

The middle-aged man sitting in the captain’s chair on the *Arbatel*, a DEM-made 500-meter-class airship, murmured and stroked his beard.

James A. Paddington. With a rank equivalent to colonel in DEM Industries’ second enforcement division, he had been assigned by Westcott to captain the ship.

“Surprisingly anticlimactic,” he remarked. “Is that really a Spirit?”

“Please make sure to stay on guard,” came the voice of a young girl through the speakers on the bridge. The voice of call sign Adeptus One and head of the second DEM enforcement division, Ellen. *“She may be a Spirit. That is reason enough to be on high alert.”*

He shrugged. “I shall take that to heart then.”

Ellen frowned ever so slightly, seeming unhappy with Paddington’s response.

“...Tch.” He clicked his tongue too quietly for her to hear.

He didn’t care if she was the strongest wizard or whatever; he didn’t particularly enjoy being ordered around by someone young enough to be his daughter. All the more so when the woman giving him orders was rumored to be Westcott’s mistress.

Paddington, however, wasn’t so incompetent that he didn’t understand his position here and role in this mission, and he was also not so childish as to pointlessly share his personal distaste for her. He cleared his throat and addressed the girl on the screen. “So what do we do? She might be a Spirit, but we should be able to capture a lone girl quite easily if we bring in the Bandersnatch.”

“It’s not that simple. We proceed with caution. Please interrupt electronic communications.”

“Roger. Parallel activation of Ashcroft-β twenty-five through forty, deployment of Permanent Territory. Target: Arubi Island.”

The crew quickly began to tap at their consoles.

A thin CG dome was rendered over the image of Arubi Island on-screen—an invisible wall, undetectable by the naked eye, untouchable in the physical space. A Territory.

Arbatel was floating twenty thousand meters above Arubi. From where it hung in the sky, it used its Ashcroft-β Realizers to deploy a Territory large enough to cover the entire island; AST member Territories paled in comparison. With this dome in place, transmissions between the island and the outside

world were possible only via the special devices used by Ellen and her comrades. Meaning that whatever happened on the island, the AST could not interfere.

“Speaking of, what should we do about that wizard?” Paddington asked, stroking his chin. He was sure there had been talk of an AST wizard who attended the same school as the target. He’d heard, however, that she was suspended at present and thus prohibited from using a Realizer, so he couldn’t imagine she would have much impact on their mission. The issue was the fact that this wizard had met Ellen before.

“There shouldn’t be a problem. We only met for a few minutes at best, and I was wearing sunglasses at the time. It doesn’t seem like she’s notic—”

Ellen was abruptly cut off in the middle of the transmission.

Paddington glanced at the monitor and saw that she had thrown her hands up over her face because of a sudden wind. “Are you all right, Chief?”

“Yes. But...this is strange,” Ellen said, looking up at the sky.

At the same time, Paddington saw a change in the video displayed on the bridge’s large monitor. He frowned.

The reason was simple. The clouds were swirling at a speed that would normally be unthinkable, as though whipped up by an invisible hand.

“Aah, seriously? They left us behind! Hurry up, Tohka!” Shido quickened his pace as he looked back at Tohka, who was still craning her neck.

Tohka had insisted on finding out who was watching them, so they’d gone to take a look around, and at some point, everyone from their school had moved on without them.

“Mm. Sorry. But I really did feel like we were being watched,” she apologized, trotting after him.

Shido let out a sigh. “Well, yeah, when you make that much of a fuss, people are gonna stare.”

“Mmm, was that what was going on...?” She half groaned and fell silent.

“Umm. I’m pretty sure it was this way, right?” Shido took a left where the

road split, trying to visualize the map he'd looked at before they left. He remembered the museum they were supposed to visit being this way.

He touched his right ear and checked that the small earpiece was there. He'd been told to wear it in case Tohka's mood destabilized while they were on the trip.

Kotori was apparently not in Japan at the moment, having gone to some headquarters or other, but *Fraxinus* was hovering above the island. In the worst-case scenario, he could contact them before they got hopelessly lost.

"Mm?"

He heard a doubtful sound from Tohka behind and stopped. When he looked back, he saw her staring up at the sky again. "Hey, give it a rest already. No matter how hard you look—"

"No, that's not it," she interrupted him. "Don't you think that looks weird?"

"Huh...?" He turned his own eyes to the sky and was suddenly at a loss for words. "Wh-what...is *that*?"

The sky had been perfectly clear until a moment ago, but now a vortex of gray clouds swirled above their heads. And the area around them was changing shockingly fast. The blue sky turned gray. The breeze, a gale. The peaceful water, crashing waves.

In terms of time, not even a minute had passed, but in that fleeting instant, the world around them had changed completely. The wind roared like an earthquake, and the trees whipped about wildly. The gale was so strong, it was practically typhoon-level already. It seemed that at least one nearby garbage can had overturned, given that empty cans and newspapers now whipped across his field of view.

Shido grabbed Tohka's shoulders and pulled her down low. They might have been knocked over by the wind otherwise.

"What...the hell...?!" He furrowed his brow as he covered his face with his arm.

The weather forecast had said that all three days of their school trip would be

sunny. Of course, Shido didn't think that would be 100 percent accurate, but this was just strange.

"Tohka, you okay?! We have to hurry to the—"

"Shido! Watch out!" Tohka shoved him away midsentence.

"Wha...?"

An instant later, a metal garbage can slammed into Tohka's head.

"Hng-a-oof?!" Crying out somewhat comically, she collapsed on the spot.

"H-hey, Tohka! Tohka!" Shido shouted in a panic, shaking her shoulders, but she was out cold. "Ngh... We need to get moving."

He managed to somehow hoist her onto his back and started walking in the direction of the museum. Slowly but steadily, he moved forward one step at a time.

"It's just a little farther, Tohka!"

How long had they been walking in this state...?

"Ah...?" Shido frowned.

In the center of the raging sky, he saw what looked to be two silhouettes.

"That's..." He gasped.

Floating people meant only two things to Shido: Spirits or AST wizards.

"No way..." A bad feeling tickled his brain.

A violent storm coming on so suddenly was a near impossibility. If it was because of a Spirit...

"No, but...the spacequake alarm didn't go off. What exactly...?" Shido racked his brain for a few seconds before setting out again on his predetermined route.

If those silhouettes really were Spirits, he couldn't just walk away. But he didn't have any proof that they were, and his first priority was getting Tohka to safety. He adjusted the way his unconscious passenger rested on his back and kept trudging toward the museum.

However...

“...!” He gasped.

The two shadows clashing in the sky above slammed into each other so hard that they generated an even greater shock wave, and the wind grew impossibly strong, making everything up to that point feel like a gentle breeze.

“Wh-whoa!” He braced his feet to keep from getting blown away and curled into himself.

The shadows wreaking havoc with the air itself knocked each other out of the sky and crashed into the ground. Exactly to the right and left of Shido.

“Wha...?” Sweat beaded on his forehead. Panic squeezed his heart, and his throat was suddenly dry as a bone.

The storm raging around him abruptly weakened.

“Huh...?” He furrowed his brow unconsciously and looked around.

The storm had...not yet ended. Wind still blew on Arubi Island. But around Shido and Tohka—or to be more precise, around the two shadows that had fallen to earth—the air was calm, like the eye of a typhoon.

“Keh. Keh-keh-keh-keh-keh...”

From his right, a girl marched over, a bold smile on her face. She was around the same age as Shido. Long orange hair tied back on her head. Mercury-colored eyes. Her perfectly symmetrical face was twisted up into a sneer.

Most distinctive of all was her outfit. Wrapped in a dark cloak, her body was covered in belts with buckles fastened seemingly at random. And she had manacles around her right wrist and ankle, complete with trailing broken chains, like a criminal who had committed an unspeakably awful crime. Or some kind of thrill-seeking masochist.

“—Bravo, Yuzuru! As expected from my other half. Only you could manage to score twenty-five wins, twenty-five losses, and forty-nine draws. But that ends this very day.”

She had a slightly strange way of speaking, exaggerated or perhaps theatrical.

“Objection. Kaguya does not get to decide this hundredth battle; Yuzuru does.”

This came from a girl with her long hair tied in a braid. Although her face was the spitting image of Kaguya's, her expression was languid, her eyes half-closed. She also wore bondage gear similar to Kaguya's, although the design was slightly different. And the manacles were on the opposite side, hanging from her left wrist and ankle.

"Ha, you do prattle on. Perhaps it's time for you to accept that I am the Spirit befitting the title of Yamai?"

"Disagree. Yuzuru will be the survivor. You are not worthy of the Yamai name."

"Keh... Your struggle is in vain. I foresaw the outcome long ago with the future sight of my witch's eye: You pierced by the next blow of my Sturm Lanze!"

"Argument. There have been no instances of your witch's eye being correct," Yuzuru said.

"Sh-shut up!" Kaguya stammered, her dramatic style of speech completely vanishing. "It totally has been right before! Don't make fun of me!"

"Demand. Yuzuru requests that Kaguya provide a specific list of examples."

"Nnngh! Look, come on. You know... I've predicted the weather right."

"Sneer. I cannot contain my laughter at this paltry result of your witch's eye—
asterisk laugh asterisk. It's no different from flipping a coin." Yuzuru put a hand to her mouth and breathed strangely. Apparently, this was her laughing.

From Kaguya's perspective, this was humiliating. "Sh-shut it! Mocking my magical sight is worthy *of* death! You will pay *in* flesh *for* angering me!" she shouted as she dropped into a fighting stance. But she emphasized the wrong words, so her declaration didn't really have the desired effect.

Yuzuru, however, paid this no mind. "Demand. Yuzuru asks that you explain Sturm Lanze."

"Keh," the other girl snorted. "There is not a vessel bound by reason that could comprehend my Sturm Lanze. Solid and yet formless. Visible but invisible. A conceptual power specialized in piercing."

"Summary. In other words, it is meaningless?"

“Tch! No! It does have meaning! You’re just an idiot who can’t understand it, Yuzuru!”

“Petition. Then explain so that Yuzuru can also understand. Given how smart you are, you should be able to.”

“I... N-naturally. But sadly, my jet-black brain cells have ascended to a higher dimension than you could even hope to comprehend. Yes. I am like a lion talking to an ant.”

“Understood. So in other words, you can’t.”

“Keh-keh, you... You’d do best not to anger—”

“Sneer. Sturm Lanze. Ha. Ha.”

“D-don’t laaaaaugh!” Kaguya shouted, her face beet red as she threw her hands out. The chain attached to her right wrist rattled, and the raging storm in the area increased in intensity.

As if to match her, Yuzuru dropped into a fighting stance as well.

The two girls glared at each other on high alert.

“Sink into the black! Hyaaaah!”

“Charge. Hiyah.”

With the shriek of a battle cry and a tired sigh, they launched themselves forward at exactly the same moment.

“Ngh...!” Shido gasped. If he was dragged into a clash between two Spirits at this close range, he would be helpless. He might have been able to keep himself alive with Kotori’s Spirit power, but it wasn’t hard to imagine what would happen to the unconscious girl on his back.

Even as he considered this, the Spirits were closing in on each other at incredible speed.

He had no time left for thinking. Shido took a deep breath.

“Stooooooooooooooooopppppppp!”

““ ...?!””

The girls stopped in their tracks.

“What was that voice...? Er, yes, it sounded like the lamentations of the dead echoing from the bottom of the Cocytus.”

“Report. Kaguya, please look at that.” Yuzuru pointed at Shido, and Kaguya frowned. It appeared that they really had only just noticed Shido and Tohka.

“Humans? Impossible. Who could set foot in our battle arena?”

“Admiration. I am overcome by surprise.”

They turned doubtful eyes on him.

“Oh, uh...,” Shido stammered and took a step back. He’d managed to stop their charge, but in exchange, he’d drawn their attention. Pierced by two pairs of sharp eyes, he swallowed hard.

Although there was nothing else he could have done, shouting at them had been rather stupid of him. He had deliberately drawn the attention of (not one but two!) Spirits with unknown personalities and temperaments. If they were belligerent, this situation was quickly going to go from bad to worse.

Static crackled in the eardrum of his right ear, and then he heard a sleepy voice.

“...Shin. Can you hear me, Shin?”

“Reine!”

“...Aah, I finally got through. Where on earth are you?”

“I—” Shido lowered his voice and briefly explained what had transpired and the fact that two Spirits currently stood before him.

“...What did you say? In the wind, two—impossible.”

“D-do you know anything about them?”

“What exactly do you wish to gain by intruding upon our sacred final battle?” Kaguya demanded to know, as if to interrupt the conversation between Shido and Reine, her gaze sharp. “Depending on your response, you may end up pierced by my, um, Schatten Lanze.”

“Argument. The name is different from before,” Yuzuru said with a cool look

on her face.

“Wh-whatever!” Kaguya snarled like a carnivorous beast. “Quiet, Yuzuru!”

“Doubt. I do not understand why Yuzuru must be silent.”

A number of things tugged at his curiosity, but Shido went with the most ominous of the words spoken. “Your f-final battle...?”

“Exactly.” Kaguya narrowed her eyes. “You appeared in this field and forced this extended break from our sacred final battle to determine our fate. How do you plan to atone?”

“Restraint. Kaguya, that is a threat.”

“Shut up! And just when I was finally getting into the groove...”

“Confirmation. Did you say something?”

“I-it was nothing!” Kaguya snorted in indignation and turned her face away from Yuzuru. “Anyway, I still have fight in me. So—” But then her eyes flew open as if she had just remembered something. “Oh, I know! In that case...”

She turned toward Yuzuru once more and looked her up and down carefully from head to toe, as if appraising a piece of merchandise.

“Question. What is it, Kaguya?”

“Keh-keh... I have been struck by a flash of inspiration, Yuzuru. You and I have battled in many different ways. To the point where we have exhausted all paths,” Kaguya continued, gesturing dramatically as though she were acting in a play. “But...perhaps there is one score we have yet to settle?”

“Doubt. What do you mean, one score we have yet to settle?” Yuzuru looked at her quizzically, and Kaguya chuckled as she glanced at Shido.

“Huh...?” Shido saw something a little cold in her expression.



While the eleventh-grade students of Raizen High School were heading to their first scheduled destination, the wind started gusting violently in the blink of an eye, and before they knew it, they were in the middle of a violent storm. Unable to continue at a leisurely pace, they ran into the museum at the

instruction of their teachers, a place not far from the airport.

“Shido...,” Origami murmured into the powerful wind making the thick glass of the windows creak, and she clenched her fists.

There was no sign of Shido (and one dung beetle) among the students taking refuge in the museum. He must have gotten separated from the group along the way and been left alone outside. Origami had obviously tried to race outside to go look for him, but she was stopped by a teacher when she was almost out the door. Even if she had gotten past them, she wouldn’t have made much headway in this typhoon.

“Ngh...” All she could do now was pray for Shido’s safety. She was overcome by an intense helplessness and frustration that had no outlet.

“Hey, is the sky kinda clearing up?” asked a boy near the window. The rest of the students clustered around the windows to look outside.

Origami yanked her head up as if compelled by that voice and wove her way between the other students as she headed straight for the door of the museum.

“Ah! T-Tobiichi! It’s still too dangerous out there!” Tamae tried to stop her, but Origami ran right past her and yanked the door open.

“...?” She stopped in place. The person she sought was standing before her in front of the museum.

“H-hey...Origami,” Shido said. Maybe because of the wind, his hair and clothes were a mess, but fortunately, he didn’t appear to have been injured.

Even so, she felt no relief. Instead, she frowned and sharpened her gaze. Something was off with Shido... Or rather, he had some strange new accessories.

First, there was Tohka on his back. She had apparently passed out.

That was fine. Well, technically, it wasn’t, but it wasn’t totally unexpected.

The issue was...

“Well, Shido? I’m more appealing than Yuzuru, right? Choose me, and I’ll let you plant a kiss wherever you wish to conclude our contract!”

“Temptation. Please choose Yuzuru. I will do good things to you. I’m amazing. Kaguya is nothing.”

Clad in school uniforms, two girls with identical faces stood on either side of Shido, touching him in an excessively familiar fashion as they tried to seduce him.

In visible despair, Shido recalled the events of ten minutes prior as his classmates all turned their eyes on him.

In the center of the pseudo-typhoon, Kaguya had spoken, a bold smile on her face.

“The score we have yet to settle... In other words, our charm!” she declared, striking a cool pose. *“Don’t you think that the true Spirit, the child of the hurricane, Yamai needs not only power and intelligence, but also a beauty and allure great enough to make all of creation jealous?”*

“Consideration...” Yuzuru fell silent for a few seconds as she took her turn to look Kaguya up and down—slowly, from head to toe, as if estimating her value. And then she nodded. *“Answer. ‘I see’ is my response. We have not competed on that before.”*

“Keh-keh... Right? But that’s only natural. No one has ever dared to interrupt our battle, and thus we were unable to have a third party provide impartial judgment. Until now.” Kaguya chuckled and snapped a finger out at Shido. *“You there. What are you called?”*

“Huh? Sh-Shido Itsuka.”

“Shido. Hmm. An appropriately frail name for a sacrifice. Excellent. We will leave the decision to you.”

“Uh...? Um, oh...” Shido’s eyes went wide. He didn’t have the first clue as to what she was talking about.

But Kaguya clearly could not have cared less about what he thought. She lifted her chin jeeringly and continued in a challenging tone, *“How about it, Yuzuru? Are you brave enough to answer this call to battle? Keh-keh. Of course, given that my charisma is powerful enough to bring the world to its knees, it’s clear how this contest will end. Should you turn tail and run, I would not call you*

coward.”

“Negative. That is not possible. There is no path to victory for Kaguya. Yuzuru is far more appealing. Men fall like dominoes before me.”

“Keh-keh. Your arrogance is the only fully developed trait about you.”

“Declaration. Yuzuru is cuter. Frankly, Kaguya is below average.”

“Wh-what did you saaaaaaaay?!” Kaguya shouted, hurling her theatrical protests into the depths of oblivion.

As far as Shido was concerned, he thought Kaguya looked beautiful. If she was below average, then the rest of the women in the world didn’t have a hope of ever reaching the high bar set by Yuzuru.

“We have the same face!” Kaguya cried. *“The difference between us can’t be that different!”*

“Pity. Appeal and charm are not decided solely on the construction of the face. Even if the raw materials are the same, the impressions they create are different. But please don’t worry. In the world of uggos, you’re in a relatively high standing.”

“In the world of uggos?! Doesn’t the fact that you can say that so casually mean that your personality is ugly?!”

“Remorse. I forgot that it is not always to the benefit of the person at hand to tell the truth.”

“It’s not the truuuuuuth!” Kaguya clutched her head and then seemed to remember Shido’s existence. She straightened up and cleared her throat.

“A-anyway! If you would speak so, then you do not object, yes?” She snapped a finger out at Yuzuru. *“The final battle! The winner will incorporate the loser and become the true Yamai! The method of contest is simple and clear! Whoever wins over this man—Shido—is the victor!”*

“Agreement. I accept the terms of this contest.”

“H-hang on a second!”

And now here they were.

After a discussion with Reine, it was decided that bluntly refusing this demand/request was far too dangerous. So he'd brought the girls along. The eyes of his classmates boring into him now were painful.

"I-Itsuka? Who are these girls with you? I've never seen them before..."

"Huh? You already picked up some local girls and are forcing them to cosplay? You always carry girls' uniforms around with you, Itsuka?"

"I just thought of a great job for you, Itsuka. You wear a signboard around school that says: HUMAN PUNCHING BAG, 1,000 YEN PER MINUTE. I'm sure you'll be able to buy a house in no time."

The students all started to talk at once. But that was only natural, given that Shido had supposedly gotten lost in the storm and somehow returned with two strange girls in tow.

Per Reine's instructions, the pair had dematerialized their Astral Dresses and clothed themselves in the Raizen High School summer uniform. Just like he had with Tohka, Shido had helped them produce the outfits with the information they could glean from looking at the uniform.

The entire situation might have been weird already, but if they had still been wearing that bondage gear, his classmates would have misunderstood and taken that to mean that Shido had particular fetishes.

Origami gave Kaguya and Yuzuru the once-over before quietly opening her mouth. "Shido. Who are these people?"

"Uh. Umm..." he stammered, averting his eyes. Beads of sweat popped up on his face, but then a sleepy voice came from the back of the crowd, as if to put a stop to the growing commotion.

"...Aah, there you are. Transfer students Kaguya Yamai and Yuzuru Yamai... right?" The assistant homeroom teacher Reine Murasame was standing there, her head wobbling from side to side.

"Transfer students?" Origami asked.

Reine nodded. "...Normally, they'd transfer after summer break, but they wanted to come on the school trip no matter what. So we decided they would

meet us here. I got a message earlier that their flight had landed, so I sent Shido to meet them.”

“What? Tr-transfer students?” Tamae’s eyes grew round as saucers. “Ms. Murasame, I haven’t heard anything.”

“...It happened pretty suddenly. I’m sure you just missed the e-mail.”

“Uh. Uh-huh...” Tamae retreated, a look of bewilderment on her face. Well, that was the look a person would make if the person who was notified of transfer students was not you, the homeroom teacher, but Reine.

Origami looked at Reine with doubtful eyes before returning her gaze to Shido. “Really?”

“R-really...,” he replied, his voice strained.

Kaguya and Yuzuru nodded from where they were glued to either side of him. As a condition for helping judge their final battle or whatever it was, Shido had told them to go along with his story.

“Keh-keh... That’s exactly right. Consider it an honor that you are able to welcome the children of the hurricane, human.”

“Affirmative. There is no mistake in what he says.”

“...” Origami still didn’t seem entirely convinced, but she had apparently determined that it was pointless for her to say anything when both of the girls and teachers were corroborating this strange story. She let out a sigh. “Oh.”

But then her gaze sharpened. “That still doesn’t explain why you are glued to Shido?”

“Aah, well, you see—”

“Response. Because—”

“Y-you know! The wind was so strong, they were just trying to keep from being blown away!” Shido yelled loudly enough to drown out both Kaguya and Yuzuru. If they said the wrong thing now, all the lies would have been for nothing. He continued to ramble, hoping to fill the silence with enough chatter so they wouldn’t have a chance to say anything. “A-anyway, Tohka got hit in the head with a piece of garbage, and it knocked her out. Is there someplace she

could lie down?”

“...Oh, really? That’s awful. Come this way. Transfer students, I’ll explain some key things to you. You come along, too,” Reine said in a monotone and beckoned Shido and his entourage with a hand.

All eyes on him, Shido followed Reine deeper into the museum.

After Reine had showed them to the office, Shido set Tohka down on the sofa and bowed to the woman. “Thanks. You really saved me there.”

“...Oh, don’t mention it. More importantly...” Reine looked at Shido or, more precisely, at the two girls who had twined themselves around his arms. They had stepped away when he put Tohka down and grabbed on to him again the second he was done.

And then they started whispering at him, like the change of place didn’t change the contest between them.

“Now, Shido. All you have to do is choose me. Simply swear your loyalty to Kaguya Yamai and devote your mind, body, and soul to me.”

“Negative. Nothing good will come of choosing Kaguya. Vote Yuzuru with a clear conscience.”

The girls whispered in Shido’s ears as if Reine and Tohka were not in the room. Shido squirmed, sweating.

“...This has turned into a real bit of trouble, hmm?” Reine scratched her cheek.

“...Yes,” Shido agreed, sounding like he was suffering.

“Keh-keh... This is a treat, isn’t it? You, a mere human, may receive our favor and attention for a brief moment. Weep tears of joy at your good fortune. There is no need to gripe.”

“Skepticism. While Yuzuru is clearly desirable, is there a man who would delight at being approached by Kaguya?”



“H-hmph... Challenge me in this manner if you wish, but it will be to no avail. Once we see the results of the final battle, all will become clear. Now, Shido, go ahead and speak the truth. Who is more appealing as a woman, me or Yuzuru?”

“Question. Yuzuru or this rag? Who is cuter?”

“Wait. Stop that subtle slander!”

“Disregard. Who: This rag or Yuzuru?”

“Are you doubling down?!”

Kaguya and Yuzuru pressed close to Shido as they sparred verbally.

Shido waved his hands. “H-hang on a minute. You keep going on about battle this, battle that... Why are you even fighting?”

“...Hmm? Ohhh.” Kaguya jerked her chin up, all haughty. “Didn’t we mention it? We were originally one Spirit called Yamai.”

“Affirmative. But after a number of appearances in this world, Yamai was split into two.”

“Split into two...? Is that even...?” Shido frowned as he looked back and forth between them. Although their hairstyles and facial expressions were different, their faces strongly resembled each other. More than twins. If someone told him they were clones, he would have believed it. “H-how did that happen?”

“Only the goddess of fate on her throne in the heavens knows the truth. Hmph, perhaps boredom and world-weariness torture her. From time to time, she enjoys a random toss of the dice with no rhyme or reason.”

“Huh...?”

“Summary. Kaguya is saying we don’t really know.”

“Ohhh... Okay.” Shido nodded, finally understanding thanks to Yuzuru’s explanation.

“That’s not very poetic,” Kaguya snapped. “And now that we have been rent asunder, each time we gaze upon the other’s face, we are reminded of this—the destiny, the mission etched into this body, infused in this blood. Yes. We remember there is only one *true* Spirit Yamai in this world!”

“Explanation. Yuzuru and Kaguya have been split into two, but we realized how to return to being one.”

“You ‘realized’...?”

“Addendum. It might be more correct to say we ‘knew.’ From the instant we were split apart, we have understood what will happen to our bodies.” Yuzuru pointed to her head and continued. “Explanation. However, the personality of the original Yamai has been lost. In other words, when the time comes, only one of us can be the true personality of Yamai.”

“S-so then...about the final battle...”

The girls nodded as one. Shido continued, cheeks hot.

“That storm was caused by you two fighting?”

“It was.” Kaguya crossed her arms, looking smug. “Our battle spans a great stretch of time. Yes. At the current stage, we have fought ninety-nine contests.”

“Ninety-nine... You’ve fought for that long?!”

“Correction. Although we say ‘fighting,’ it is not the case that we have simply been battering each other. Our contest methods cover a great deal of ground, such as races, cup-and-ball games, and speed eating.”

“...”

Those were pretty peaceful contests. Although if these two were to race, he felt like they would do some serious damage to the area.

“The results are twenty-five wins, twenty-five losses, forty-nine draws. The winner of what was our hundredth battle should have been the true Yamai. And yet...” Kaguya glared at Shido, and he caught his breath.

He understood now. He had apparently interrupted this all-important fight. But it’s not like he’d had any choice in the matter. If he hadn’t stopped them, who knew what would have happened to Tohka?

When Shido stayed silent, Kaguya and Yuzuru grabbed a hold of his arms again.

“Keh... But that is trivial now. In fact, I feel gratitude. Thanks to you, we have a

new way to compete with each other.”

“Affirmative. Given that our physical challenges have ended in draws so many times already, I did wonder if another slugging match was appropriate for our final battle. I have no objections to this contest.”

Both of them leaned enticingly into him.

“Uh, oh, that’s good to hear, but...” Shido felt his face grow red and turned pleading eyes toward Reine.

Reine—ever dependable—was sitting in a chair, fiddling with a small terminal, and nodding to herself with a serious look on her face. “...It really is out.”

“Wh-what’s out?” he asked, and Reine turned toward him.

“...Oh, communications with *Fraxinus* are cut off.”

“Huh? Wh-why would they...?”

“...It’s unclear. I’m going to look into it a bit.” She closed her terminal and stood up. After staring hard at Kaguya and Yuzuru snuggled up against Shido, she said, “...Kaguya and Yuzuru, right? You’re competing over Shin in order to become the true Spirit Yamai. Can you confirm?”

Kaguya and Yuzuru looked at her for the first time.

“Yes, that is the case. Watch if you wish, but I’ll show no mercy should you attempt to interfere, hmm?”

“Question. Who are you?”

“...One of the schoolteachers,” Reine said deceptively before turning on her heel. “Shin, you watch Tohka. Kaguya. Yuzuru. I need to talk to you. Come with me.”

“R-Reine!” Shido sent her a look to try and say that it was too dangerous. These girls were Spirits, after all.

But Reine raised a hand as if to say not to worry.

“Hngh... *This* is what you propose to us? Why should we obey the words of a mere human?”

“Request denied. Yuzuru will stay with Shido.”

They both refused to budge. Reine shrugged, as if this was within the realm of her expectations.

“...Shin’s a harder nut to crack than he looks,” she said. “I think it couldn’t hurt to hear what I have to say.”

“What...?”

“...It’s obvious from how he’s reacting, isn’t it? Even I can tell that you are extremely cute and appealing girls. And yet he still hasn’t chosen either of you.”

““...”” Kaguya and Yuzuru exchanged a glance, eyes wide.

“...So what’s it going to be? Personally, I don’t care if it’s just one or the other of you.” Reine opened the office door.

The two girls glanced at each other once more and then regretfully let go of Shido to follow Reine.

Chapter 3

Double Approach

Fast forward to 6:50 PM.

The sun was setting, and the humid heat, which had been so oppressive during the day, was finally easing a little. The sounds of the cicadas that had echoed through the afternoon were gradually replaced by those of the katydids.

The class had waited for Tohka to wake up before heading to the inn for the night. They all carried their bags to their rooms, had supper, and were now enjoying some free time.

All except for Shido.

“Aah... Why this again...?” He held out a hand against the wall as he staggered down the hall of the inn.

Once again, unsealed Spirits had shown up out of nowhere and dragged him into a whole situation. All while no one had evacuated to shelters.

Kaguya and Yuzuru had settled down a great deal after Reine spoke to them at the museum. That wasn't quite enough to put his anxiety to rest, however.

“I have to...do something.” He trudged forward, a grimace on his face.

He was on his way to Reine's room. When they left the museum, she told him to come see her later so that they could discuss their next steps.

But he stopped as he approached the end of the hallway.

A head was poking out around each corner, and two sets of eyes were staring at him intently.

He quickly realized whom they belonged to, swallowed his nervousness, and opened his mouth. “Wh-what are you doing, Kaguya, Yuzuru?”

The two Spirits stepped out in front of him.

“Keh-keh... You sensed my presence then. I’m impressed.”

“Argument. Is it not that your hiding technique was poor?”

“...! I—I don’t need to hear that from *you*, Yuzuru! I was hiding way better than you were!”

“Objection. There is no possible way that Kaguya is able to hide better than Yuzuru.”

If Shido were allowed to weigh in, they were both equally conspicuous, but he decided to keep that to himself.

“What are you doing?” he asked, and the two girls exchanged a look before glancing back at Shido.

“Keh. I shall tell you. You’d do well to come.”

“Guaranteed. Come this way.”

At exactly the same moment, they each pulled on one of Shido’s arms.

“Wh-what’s going on?” Looking back and forth between them, baffled, Shido was dragged along until they reached their apparent destination.

A blue curtain and a red curtain were hanging over two neighboring entrances. One said MEN and the other WOMEN in big letters. They were at the outdoor bathing area the inn was famous for.

“...The bath?” Shido frowned.

“Keh-keh.” Kaguya nodded in her exaggerated way. “The stain of the everlasting darkness has accumulated on your body. Allow me to purify it.”

“Huh?”

“Translation. She’s saying to please get in the bath and get cleaned up.”

“Ohhh, is that it...? But it’s not time to take a bath yet. I don’t have a towel or a change of clothes, either. And there’s somewhere I need to be right now.”

He started to turn around and was yanked back by firm hands on each arm.

“Owww! Wh-what are you doing?”

“You believed you have a choice? Enough complaints about trivialities. Clear

away your impurity.”

“Petition. Please. We have made all the requisite preparations for bathing.” Yuzuru dropped her gaze to indicate a stack of folded towels and yukata robes.

“Wh-why would you...? What exactly are you planning?”

“Keh... My abstruse and sublime thoughts could never be understood by an average person.”

“An idea. A large bathing area with no one else in it is a very good thing.”

“...” After looking back and forth between them with doubtful eyes, Shido let out a long sigh. It wasn’t as though Reine had said any specific time, and he was a bit worried about what they would do if he refused. “Fine. Then I’ll get in the bath first.”

“Keh-keh... As long as you understand.”

“Praise. I express respect for your decision.”

He still had no idea what they wanted, but at the same time, he did want to get in the bath and wash away his sweat and exhaustion. He grabbed a towel and a robe and went into the men’s bath.

When he glanced back, Kaguya’s cheeks were pink like she was a little embarrassed, and Yuzuru had a hand to her mouth for whatever reason. Still suspicious of their motives, Shido took off his clothes in the changing room and opened the door clouded with steam, small towel in hand.

“Whoa... This is incredible,” he said in admiration of the scene before his eyes.

Hot water, faintly tinted, filled an enormous tub cut out of stone, clouds of thick steam puffing up above it. And beyond the tub was a view of the ocean, filling the air with the sound of gentle waves. Because it wasn’t bath time yet, the place was deserted. He started to understand what Yuzuru meant about an empty bath being a good thing.

He quickly washed himself in the shower area before setting a small towel on his head and sinking into the hot water.

“Aaah...” He groaned like an old man and stretched out his arms and legs, so that heat soaked into every part of his body.

Klak. He heard a clattering sound as the door to the bathing area opened.

Shido turned his eyes toward the entrance to check if someone had come in and then froze in the water. “Wha...?”

Kaguya and Yuzuru, whom he had supposedly left in the hallway, were standing there, wrapped in bath towels.

“Wh-what are you doing?! This is the men’s bath!” he shouted, but they strode without hesitation into the bathing area and walked over to where he was soaking in the tub.

The steam made the thin towels cling to their skin, casting their bodies in sharp relief. Shido’s face automatically turned red, and he sank deeper into the water.

“K-keh-keh-keh.” Kaguya crossed her arms, her cheeks reddening. “Well? You are forced to prostrate yourself before my charms.”

Yuzuru snorted. “Sneer. Charms. Laugh. This is the first I’ve heard of you having any such thing.”

“...Hmph. I’ll make you weep soon enough. When I make Shido my slave!”

“Counterattack. Challenge accepted.”

They bent their knees to step into the tub with Shido between them.

“...?!” It was against the inn’s rules to get into the tub while wearing a towel, but there was no way Shido could point that out now. Frozen with tension, he squeezed his eyes shut.

“Keh-keh... You’d do well to prepare yourself, Shido. Once you know this bounty, you shall never be satisfied with any other.”

“Negative. Shido will become a slave to Yuzuru’s body.”

“Wh-what?!” Their words only made him tenser. What was this absurd scene? And what would happen to him now? He was swept up in a fear of the unknown and the faintest hint of anticipation.

However...

“...Hmm?” When nothing happened even after a few minutes had passed,

Shido slowly opened his eyes.

The two girls encamped on either side of him were simply staring at each other.

“Keh... Out of the kindness of my heart, Yuzuru, I shall permit you to go first.”

“Negative. That is unnecessary. In fact, Kaguya, you need a leg up. I am willing to cede the initiative.”

“Y-you don’t get it, do you? The instant I lower my hand, Shido’s eyes will be glued to me. Don’t you understand I will leave you no opportunity to step onto the stage?”

“Skeptical. Isn’t the truth that you don’t know what to do?”

Kaguya twitched. “O-of course not! I’m very s-s-sexy! Wh-what is this girl even talking about?! I have plenty of adult techniques at my disposal that you’ve never even dreamed of!”

“Dubious. Then please show me.”

“Wha—?! H-hmph! Fine, watch and learn!” Kaguya stood up and looked at Shido as she put one hand on her head and the other on her waist—a pose that even a pinup girl past her prime would reject. “...Yoo-hoo.”

Yuzuru put a hand to her mouth to suppress giggles.

“Umm...” Shido scratched his cheek, not sure what he was supposed to say here. Oh, it wasn’t that it wasn’t sexy. The way the wet bath towel clung to Kaguya’s skin was definitely provocative. But the desire to flee was greater than any other feelings she might have inspired.

Kaguya’s cheeks turned bright red, and she dived back into the tub. “Wh-what is with you two?!”

“Sneer. Kaguya’s charms—asterisk laugh asterisk—are indeed a different breed.”

“Wh-what did you say?! And wait. Is that actually it? *You’re* the one who doesn’t know what to do!” Kaguya snapped a finger out at her sister, and Yuzuru’s eyebrows shot up.

“...Negative. That is not possible.”

“Ha! I wonder! How about you go ahead and show me then!”

“Admission... I suppose I could.” Yuzuru turned toward Shido. “Sex appeal. Muah!” She blew him a kiss like some star of yesteryear.

“...Oh. Uh-huh.” Once more unsure how to react, Shido flashed her an awkward smile, sweating a little.

“Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha!” Kaguya clutched her belly and laughed out loud. “What was that? I mean, *what* was *that*?! You call that sex appeal?!”

“Offensive. I do not need to hear from you, Kaguya.”

“Ha! We’re in the same boat here!”

“Negative. Kaguya’s childish body was never seductive.”

“...! I-it’s no different from yours!”

“Objection. Numerically, the ratio of flesh differs, albeit only marginally.”

“K-keh-keh... It appears you don’t know the appeal of a slender body.”

“Sneer. Slender. Asterisk laugh asterisk. The facts do not change simply because you replace the words with something that sounds better.”

“H-hmph! They’re nothing more than lumps of fat in the end, are they not?!”

“Offensive. I cannot overlook this. I conclude this to be an outburst of Kaguya’s jealousy.”

“I am not jealous! Nor am I envious! It’s obvious that Shido thinks I’m much cuter than a fattie like Yuzuru!”

“Negative. Having no chest is a fatal blow in appealing to men. No one would touch chicken bones like Kaguya.”

“Wh-who are you calling chicken bones?! ”

“Counterattack. Who are you calling a fattie?”

“What? Also, you have so many more split ends than me! Seeee? Shido hates women like that!”

“Argument. Kaguya smells slightly sweatier than Yuzuru. Your appeal as a

woman is decreased.”

“Wh-what did you say?! You have a higher body fat percentage than me!”

“Pity. I feel compassion for you whose only power is to point out such things.”

“Shut up! Come on, fattie! Jiggle-jiggle!”

“Counteroffensive. Flat as a board. Super flat.”

The two of them began to squabble once more.

“...?!” Shido jumped a little in the water when he heard the door open again and someone start to come their way. “H-hey...someone else’s here. It’s gonna be bad if you two don’t hide.”

This was the men’s bath. Naturally, the new intruder would almost certainly be a boy.

But Kaguya and Yuzuru looked perfectly calm.

“Keh-keh... Whatever do you mean, Shido?”

“Negative. We are fine. There is no need for concern.”

“Huh?” He cocked his head to one side, not understanding what they meant.

“Hiyah!” The new bather leaped into the bathtub. And then met the eyes of Shido.

It was a voice he’d heard before. Long hair the color of night. A figure with beautiful curves that was a far cry from a certain pair’s slender forms. Yes. That face... Without a doubt, this was Tohka Yatogami.

“Mm?” Tohka also noticed the current occupant of the tub. She looked at him, stunned.

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

And then...

“Aaaaaaaah?! ”

“Aaaaaaaah?! ”

They let out the exact same scream.

Tohka hurriedly slapped one arm over her chest and the other over her lower half. “Wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-why are you in here, Shido?!”

“N-no, no, no, no, no! Why did *you* come in *here*?! This is the men’s bath!”

“What are you talking about?! I went in the red one just like everyone told me to!”

“Huh?!” Shido gasped. A very bad feeling crawled up his spine. “You didn’t actually...!” He looked to either side of him, and Kaguya and Yuzuru stared back blankly.

“Mm-hmm. Before you went in, we switched the curtains. Impressive as always, if I do say so myself. Strategy master.”

“Question. Is there a problem with that?”

“Why would you...?!” he shouted and glared at them. He wanted nothing more than to curse them out, but now was not the time for that. He turned back to Tohka and bowed his head so deeply that it almost went into the water. “Tohka, you have to believe me. I swear, I would never do something like this on purpose!”

“U-uhhh...?!” Tohka looked baffled. “Th-then why are you in here?”

“I was tricked! I’m sorry. I’ll leave right now!” He started to get out of the tub, trying to look at Tohka as little as he possibly could.

“Ah... Shido!” Tohka grabbed his hand. Almost as if to hold him back.

“Wh-what, Tohka?”

“Oh... I think that’s a bad idea.”

“Huh?” At the same time as Shido’s eyes narrowed to points, the door opened again, and a group of girls came in. “Wha—?”

He immediately sank into the tub and hid behind a rock.

Now that he thought about it, this was only natural. If it was bath time and Tohka was here, that meant the other girls would all be here sooner or later, too.

“Wow! It’s so big! And the ocean’s right there!”

“Oh, the transfer students are already here. You guys were fast!”

“Huh? Tobiichi, you’re not getting in the bath?”

“I have something I must do.”

“O-oh... Good luck.”

He could hear the high-pitched voices of the girls in his class. It was only a matter of time before they found him.

“C-c-c-c-c-crap! Wh-what am I gonna do?!” Faced with this unprecedented tight spot, Shido cradled his head in his hands and sent his eyes racing around the room.

If they found him here, they would string him up by his toenails. Actually, he’d be lucky if that was all they did. He would probably be branded as a sex offender and haunted by it for the rest of his life. He’d have to spend the rest of high school being called a pervert or a degenerate or a youthful mistake. In the worst case, they could report him to the police...

He shuddered as Tohka moved out in front of him, as if to hide him.

“T-Tohka?” he asked.

“It’s not your fault, right?” She glanced back at him. “So you have to hide behind me and hurry up and escape.”

“...! Th-thanks. I owe you!”

Fortunately, he was less than clearly visible, thanks to the steam and the reddish-brown water. With Tohka serving as his barrier, he might actually be able to make it out of here alive.

“Okay,” Tohka said. “Here we go.”

“R-right.” He nodded.

Tohka began to crabwalk slowly, still submerged in the tub. Shido moved along with her, hiding behind her.

However...

“Oh! I found Tohka!”

“What are you doing over there on the edge?”

“Whoa! Your skin’s amazing! Let me give you a rubdown!”

The Ai-Mai-Mii trio jumped onto the scene. The music for an enemy encounter in an RPG began to play in Shido’s head.

“Eep!”

“O-oh, no reason! Don’t bother with me!” Tohka said, but Ai-Mai-Mii were bubbling over with interest in her. They were sure to notice Shido behind her like this.

“Ah!” Tohka shouted and pointed into the distance. “There’s a huge *kinako* bun over there!”

The three girls whirled their heads in that direction.

“...!”



The perfect opportunity. Shido spun around and dived over the stone wall into the ocean.

Meanwhile, a number of gentlemen were assembled in a circle in one corner of the men's bath, speaking in whispers.

"Hey, Tonomachi, are you sure about this?"

"Yeah, no mistake." Tonomachi's lips curled up at the edges. "If you're just bathing like normal, you wouldn't notice it, but there's a gap in part of the hedge that separates the men's and women's baths."

"Whoa!" Brothers in battle cried out with their shared purpose.

Tonomachi bobbed his head up and down and thrust a hand forward. The others layered their hands on top of his.

"You raring and ready to go?!"

"Yes!"

"Excellent! Then follow me! I'll show you paradise on earth!"

"Yaaaah!"

Their throaty cries rang out as they threw their hands up into the air.

Tonomachi lowered his eyes as if savoring the lingering sense of intoxication before starting to walk slowly along the hedge as quietly as possible.

"Wohkay, here we go..." He looked his comrades over, and they all nodded.

"You go first, Tonomachi."

"You've given us courage. Lead the way."

"Burn the scene into those eyes and that heart."

"Guys..." Tonomachi wiped away the unbidden hot tears and nodded in return. "Here goes nothing. Watch how I live, men!" He straightened up and peered through the hint of a gap in the hedge.

"..."

"..."

He met someone's eyes.

Staring in from the women's bath side was Origami Tobiichi.

"...S-sorry to have disturbed you," Tonomachi croaked and retreated.

"...Hmm?" Reine lifted her face from her small terminal. She could hear wet footsteps in the hallway outside.

The noise stopped in front of her door, followed by a knock.

"...Come in," she said, and the door slowly opened.

Shido stepped inside, wearing only a towel around his waist. For some reason, he was completely soaked, clutching his shoulders and shaking.

Reine took a few seconds to think and then slapped a fist into one hand. "...Isn't it a bit early for a covert nighttime rendezvous?"



"Keh-keh... Base humans. Consider it an honor to be in this sleeping space with me. Carve my exalted name into your heart. Child of the hurricane, Kaguya Yamai."

The girl introduced herself thusly to Tohka and the rest of her new roommates in Room 401, sat down at the table, leaned back, and stretched her legs out. Her tone was undeniably rude, but Kaguya's smug face and high-pitched voice kept her declaration from being particularly offensive or high-handed. It was more the sort of thing that garnered a fond smile, like a small child pretending to be their favorite TV character.

"Mm. Glad you're here. Let's have fun!" Tohka nodded, crossing her arms. Smiles also spread across the faces of the team members sitting next to her: Ai, Mai, and Mii.

They had been surprised when Reine asked them to make space in their room for this girl, but they liked all things fun and cute, so they adapted fairly quickly. Their faces were filled with delight, and they began to stroke Kaguya's hair and poke her cheeks.

"Aaah! You. Are. So. Cute! I can't stand it!"

"Your hair's so soft. And your cheeks are so pokable!"

“Do you like sweet things? You want some Pocky?”

“St-stop that, peasants! Have you no manners?! Nnngh...!” Kaguya cried out. But she did help herself to some Pocky.

“Ah! Mii, I want some, too!”

“Yeah, yeah. Here you go, Tohka... Oh! Sorry, sorry. That was the last one I gave to Kaguya. Want some Yan Yan instead?”

“Wh-what is Yan Yan?!” Tohka examined the cylindrical object she was given from every angle with a serious look on her face, while Ai-Mai-Mii peppered Kaguya with questions.

“Hey, so, like, where are you from?”

“It’s weird to transfer schools at this time of year!”

“Does this mean you’ll be in our class next semester?”

Kaguya sniffed haughtily as she uncrossed and recrossed her legs. “Where am I from? Good question. The peak of the heavens and the bottom of the earth. The farthest end of the realm of the dead, the very edge of the material world. A realm that the scope of thought of those such as yourselves could never begin to understand.”

“Realm... Material world...?” Tohka cocked her head to one side. Kaguya was saying something that sounded pretty impressive. “Mm. That’s impressive, Kaguya. You really know lots of difficult words!”

“Keh-keh... So you do understand then, don’t you? You interest me. Speak your name.”

“Mm. Tohka Yatogami.”

“Tohka... Keh-keh, a fine name. See? I shall caress you.” For some reason, Kaguya was in excellent spirits. She began stroking Tohka’s head.

“Mm? Wh-what? This tickles.”

“I see great potential in you. Perhaps I shall make you my retainer on this night of nights.”

“Retainer? What’s that?”

“Keh-keh... The right to be my camp mate and by my side in the line of battle. It means that you will be able to link your name to the greatest tribe of this world.”

“Oh! I don’t really understand what that is, but you’d do something that amazing for me?!” Tohka said, taking Kaguya very seriously for some reason.

Overcome with emotion, Kaguya twirled a finger in the air. She looked somehow like an artist or an inventor who had finally, for the first time, encountered a kindred spirit. “O-of course! I shall protect you with my very body and soul! Consider yourself honored!”

“Mm, I’m definitely honored!”

Ai-Mai-Mii put their hands on their cheeks and cried out, “Awww!”

“Ugh! You’re killing me. You two are too cute!”

“Hey! Can I snap a pic? Look over here!”

“Gender is such a tiny detail. Doesn’t matter at all.”

They squirmed, readied their digital cameras, looked on with shining eyes, and licked their lips.

Kaguya frowned at them before opening her eyes wide as though she had suddenly realized something. “Tohka, you said, hmm? You couldn’t be... Are you the one Shido hoisted onto his back earlier?”

“What about Shido?” Tohka replied.

Kaguya narrowed her eyes, grabbed Tohka’s hand, and marched them over to a corner of the room.

“Whaaat? Where are you going, Kaguya?”

“My retainer and I must share some critical information. Because these words are cursed and humans cannot endure their power, your ears will drop off if you hear me speak them. If that is acceptable, then you may stand and listen.”

“Ohhh, secrets, huh? Ha-ha-ha! Don’t worry, we won’t eavesdrop on you!” Ai said, laughing.

But Tohka wasn’t having it. She shuddered as she pressed on her ears with

both hands. "M-my ears will fall off...?"

"Do not fear. Now that you have become my retainer, a mysterious power dwells within you. Rest assured."

"Oh yeah? This retainer thing's amazing," Tohka murmured, marveling.

Kaguya nodded, satisfied, before lowering her voice and asking, "Tohka, you appear well acquainted with Shido."

"Mm? Mm-hmm. I know him pretty well."

"! So you do. Keh-keh... Then I have a number of questions I wish to pose to you." Kaguya held up her fingers to indicate exactly how many.

"Petition. I am in your debt tonight. I am Yuzuru Yamai. Thank you for having me." With her listless eyes half-shut, Yuzuru splayed her fingers neatly on the floor and bowed her head.

"O-oh, you don't have to be so formal!"

In fact, Yuzuru's excessive politeness seemed to make the girls in Room 402 feel obligated to act formal as well. They fidgeted and looked away and forced awkward smiles onto their faces. This group was mainly made up of the quiet girls in class, leftovers come together to fill a room. Because they never really talked much to start with, the conversation didn't go any further than that.

"..."

Origami didn't care how awkward the atmosphere was. In fact, she actually liked this group because they were always quiet, and she didn't have to converse more than necessary.

Sitting in a corner of the room and looking out the window, she sighed. As a result of the thorough research she'd done before the trip, she had discovered that there was a gap in the hedge that separated the women's and men's baths...but she hadn't been able to catch sight of Shido.

"Uh. Um," said another member of their group, perhaps unable to stand the silence. "Don't your legs hurt? There aren't any floor cushions, so if you want..."

"Appreciation. I accept your kindness," Yuzuru said and walked over to the members of the group.

They seemed to finally breathe a sigh of relief. The weight hanging over the room lightened ever so slightly.

“It must be hard to suddenly transfer schools. If there’s anything you need to know, feel free to ask, okay?”

“Gratitude. I am in debt to your thoughtfulness.” Yuzuru bowed her head again.

The girl in glasses smiled awkwardly.

Yuzuru lifted her head. “Question. Well then, I would like to ask you one thing. Is that all right?”

“Sure. Of course. What is it?”

“Petition. I would request that you teach me how to attract male attention,” Yuzuru said, her face expressionless.

“What?!” The other girls froze.

“Uh. Umm. What was that?”

“Repetition. How to attract male attention. Please instruct me in the art of seduction to rip away the fetters of reason and transform a man into a wild animal.”

“...?!”

The girls’ faces turned red. They were the quietest girls in class. They no doubt had little immunity to this kind of frank discussion.

“Right...,” the girl who had spoken first said nervously, perhaps feeling an obligation after telling Yuzuru to feel free to ask her anything. “Like, touching his hands and pretending it was an accident?”

“N-no, that’s something out of a shojo manga...”

“Hmm. So what would be good?”

“Um, okay... Try handing him a drink you’ve already drunk from?”

“Weak,” Origami interjected. The group looked at her with surprise on their faces.

“Huh? T-Tobiichi...?”

“What do you mean...?”

“That won’t get you anywhere. You can’t pursue the object of your affection with such aimless acts.”

“Petition.” Yuzuru’s eyes were shining quietly. “You appear to be no ordinary mortal. Please instruct me.”

“...” Origami sighed softly, turned toward Yuzuru, and held a finger up in front of her.

Yuzuru immediately got up and sat formally on her knees in front of Origami.

And then Origami began to speak quietly. “First, the key to it all is...”



Having somehow managed to pull himself out of the ocean and make it to Reine’s room to borrow her spare yukata, Shido polished off the cup of tea she poured for him before finally heaving a huge sigh. “Thanks. You saved my life...”

“...It’s fine,” Reine said, shrugging. “So you had a disaster.”

Shido unconsciously averted his eyes. Reine was wearing one of the inn’s yukatas, but the obi belt was tied rather sloppily, so every time she moved, her chest peeked out. It was a rather potent poison for the eyes of a healthy teenage boy.

“...? Is something wrong?”

“N-no. Anyway, have you restored communication with *Fraxinus* yet?”

Reine shook her head. “...No.”

“No...huh. Um, so then, those two—Kaguya and Yuzuru...”

Reine nodded and began to tap away at a small laptop computer on the table. Shown on the screen were two figures dancing in the wind recorded from a distance, together with a detailed numbers and text display.

He couldn’t make out the faces. “Is this...Kaguya and Yuzuru?” he asked, pointing at the screen.

“...Yes, probably.” Reine tilted her head a little to one side. “The truth is,

they're kind of famous in our world. The second I heard you saw two Spirits fighting in the wind, I had it more or less figured out."

"Famous? Meaning?" he asked, and she held up a hand as if to say she would get to that.

"...They're called Berserk. Spirits attended by the wind, like you saw."

"Berserk..."

"...Yes. This pair of Spirits has been sighted all over the world. When they appear, they only ever mess with each other... But the scope of their bickering is an issue."

"Yeah..." He recalled the incredible storm that afternoon that had mowed trees down and whipped up the ocean. The thought of that happening again was almost overwhelming.

"They're responsible for a noninsignificant percentage of sudden storms that have occurred around the world. On top of that, there are also plenty of witness reports. A gossip magazine in the United States once caught a picture of them, and there were arguments about whether they were angels or UFOs or even the flying spaghetti monster."

"Witnesses...? Oh!" Now that she mentioned it, he remembered that the spacequake alarms hadn't gone off even though the Spirits had appeared so close by.

The northern sector of Arubi had a high rate of shelter penetration, on par with Shido's home of Tengu City. Alarms would definitely have gone off if the smallest hint of a spacequake had been detected.

"No way. Those two appear silently?" he asked, a shiver running up his spine.

Reine shook her head. "...No, it seems that signs were detected. But it was in the sky, high above the Pacific Ocean."

His eyes grew wider. "The sky...above the Pacific Ocean?"

"...Yes. The scale of a Berserk spacequake is rank A. The explosions caused by Tohka and the others don't begin to compare. But for some reason, the majority of them have been detected in the sky miles away from anything at

all.”

“Huh? So then, why are they on the island here...?”

“...Simple. They came here after they showed up in the sky. In mere minutes, they moved hundreds of kilometers while locked in a grappling match, like a moving low-pressure front.”

“Wha...?”

“...A typhoon with a mind of its own, tormenting the world. They never display any clear intent to attack people or any hatred toward the planet. They’re capricious, wild warriors who destroy forests, mountains, and cities with nothing but the aftershocks of their battles.”

Reine tapped the `ENTER` key on her terminal, and the screen displayed a city that had been completely annihilated.

“...The damage they do is enormous. Additionally, given that they’ve exposed themselves several times to the eyes of the general public, they are a bit of a nuisance for organizations that would like to keep the existence of Spirits a secret. Thus, Kaguya and Yuzuru have been designated priority targets by both Ratatoskr and the AST... But no one’s been able to make contact with them.”

“Wh-why not?”

“Because of the range and speed of their movement. We try and follow them whenever they appear, but no one can keep up. So the fact that you happened upon them could be considered a miracle.”

“I—I guess that makes sense...”

Reine wobbled her head before continuing. “...Communication with *Fraxinus* has been cut off, so we’re unable to receive support from the ship. I can’t do sufficient analysis, either, with the materials I have on hand now. A mission now will be even riskier than usual. But it’s not all bad.”

“Meaning...?”

“...They’re vying for your attention right now, aren’t they?”

“Yeah...” He felt hot under the collar. That had caused him more than a bit of trouble earlier that evening.

“...With Berserk’s extremely low encounter rate, this is a situation we couldn’t have even dreamed of. If we let this chance slip away, it’s no exaggeration to say we might never see Kaguya and Yuzuru again. So I want you to lock them away before they change their minds about you.”

“So then you’re saying...take them on without help from Ratatoskr?” Shido asked and then gulped nervously at his own words.

It was fifty-fifty whether the AI’s proposals in any given situation were useful or not. But the fact that he wouldn’t have any information on his opponent’s mental state was a big blow. And above all else, just the knowledge that he had a group of someones to back him up, the fact that he wasn’t alone, helped him maintain his composure more than he had realized.

“...That’s basically it. And there’s one other thing that could be a problem in attacking them.”

“One other thing... Which is?”

“...Simple. Berserk is two Spirits. And right now, they’re fighting over which one can entice you. If you kiss one of them...who knows what will happen?”

“Oh...”

If he kissed one of them to seal her power, the girls would almost certainly consider whoever he kissed to be the winner of their contest. But that victor would lose her Spirit power in the moment of victory. If the loser refused to accept the outcome and started running wild, there would be no one left to stop her.

“...It’s not that I doubt their principles or pride, but...we can’t expose the students and the people of Arubi to danger.”

“I...guess not. S-so does that mean my only choice is to kiss each of them in secret?” Shido suggested.

Reine frowned. “...We can’t say that’s a good idea, either. They were originally one Spirit, right? It’s possible that a Spirit path runs between them, like with you and Tohka. In that case, the other would notice if you sealed one of them.”

“S-so then what exactly am I supposed to do?” he asked, grimacing.

She crossed her arms and nodded. "...It's not that we have no cards to play. I went ahead and came up with a strategy."

"Strategy?"

"...Yes. I struck an agreement with them this afternoon. I said I would make you choose who was more appealing before the morning of the last day of the trip—the day after tomorrow."

"The day after tomorrow..."

"...Yes. If they know that they're definitely going to get a result in two days' time, they won't be so fast to lash out or seek revenge. At the very least, we've bought ourselves a day. Time is more precious than anything for us. In the meanwhile, you've got a date."

Shido swallowed hard. "So you're saying...I have to make Kaguya and Yuzuru weak in the knees tomorrow? But—"

"...No, that's not quite it." Reine shook her head, cutting Shido off.

"This time, *I'm* going to make *you* weak in the knees."

".....Huh?"

"...So you make them weak in the knees *while I do that*."

Shido gaped at her, baffled by this so-called strategy. He couldn't see his face himself, but it must have looked pretty idiotic.

Reine didn't laugh at him, however, instead continuing quietly. "...I'm going to give Kaguya and Yuzuru earpieces, Shin, and help them attack you. All you have to do is react favorably to the things I instruct them to do. That'll convince them they can trust me."

"Huh? No. Wait. I don't—"

"...As long as they decide that the advice I give them is accurate, it'll be possible to control their behavior to a certain extent. For instance, I could tell them to kiss you *at the same time*."

"...?! " Shido gasped.

Kiss them both at the same time. Naturally, he'd never tried to kiss two Spirits

before, but if he could pull it off and seal both of their powers at the same time, then Reine had nothing to worry about.

“...The difficulty of the mission’s unchanged. But...I think this is the only way to handle the two of them. What do you think?” She stared into his eyes.

“What...do I *think*?” Shido looked back at those eyes ringed with dark circles and swallowed.

There was little doubt this would be an extremely difficult mission. If he made a single misstep, he wouldn’t be the only one exposed to danger; Tohka, Origami, everyone from school, and the people of the island would get dragged into it, too. But if he didn’t do it now, that hurricane would just pop up somewhere else in the world.

He bit his lip.

Ever since he heard about the relationship between Kaguya and Yuzuru, Shido had felt an unendurable nausea. They fought for the seat of main personality; the loser would be swallowed up into her opponent. It was the worst storyline: Kill or be killed in order to survive. From the moment they were born, they were saddled with the absurd destiny of one of them having to disappear.

But if Shido managed to seal their Spirit powers, then they might be able to reject that hopeless fate.

“...”

Memories of the Spirits he’d come into contact with flooded his mind. Tohka. Yoshino. Kurumi. Kotori.

The danger, what would happen to the world, all was secondary. Or even tertiary. None of that mattered. He just wanted to help the Spirits, these girls trapped by fate. That alone was plenty reason for him to reach out his hand.

“I understand... I’ll do it.”

“...Thanks. I appreciate it,” Reine said, dipping her head in a slight bow.

“Whoa. I mean, I—,” he started. “Wah-choo!”

His shoulders shook with a rather dramatic sneeze. Now that he was thinking about it, he did feel a little chilled despite the warm summer weather. It

appeared his dive into the ocean earlier had come back to bite him.

“...Catch a cold?”

“No... I’m sure I’m fine,” he said, sniffing.

Reine dropped a fist into one hand as if she’d just had the most amazing idea.

“Reine? Is something the matter?”

“...Mm-hmm. You really do have to take care of yourself. You head to bed.”

“Huh? No, but it’s really...”

“...If you’re down for the count tomorrow, what are we going to do about Kaguya and Yuzuru?”

He groaned. “Fine. Then I’ll call it a day here.” He was about to stand up when Reine grabbed his hand.

“...Wait, Shin. You’re sleeping here.”

His eyes widened in surprise. “Huh?”



Twenty minutes later, Shido understood what Reine’s plan was.

“Keh-keh... Reine informed me, Shido. It seems you have a cold? Ha-ha, how fragile humans are. That your body would be pained by a simple virus.”

“Declaration. Please rest easy. You will be in peak health by tomorrow if nursed by Yuzuru.”

Kaguya and Yuzuru told him from the doorway.

“...Oh, thanks,” Shido said, forcing a smile onto his lips as he lay under the blanket with a damp cloth covering his forehead.

For an instant, the words *And whose fault is it? Hmm?* threatened to slip out of him, but he locked them away in the bottom of his heart.

Reine had given him the basic overview of the situation. The girls taking care of him would increase their intimacy levels while he tried to grasp their behavior patterns.

So under the pretext of preventing him from infecting the other students, she

had vacated her teacher's room, and Shido was lying there alone. There were hidden cameras everywhere, and their actions were being recorded in detail.

Kaguya and Yuzuru were raring to go, hoping to earn some points and sway Shido's choice. They were oddly excited.

"Keh-keh... I'm coming in then."

"Pardon. I shall humbly enter."

They took off their slippers and stepped into the room, coming to either side of Shido to sit formally on their knees in their yukatas. They stared down at his face.

"...Umm, what?" he said, and Kaguya and Yuzuru lifted their faces and exchanged a glance.

"Keh-keh... Yuzuru. Let me inform you now, you will be burned if you assume I am the same Kaguya Yamai as I have been up to now. I have gained an excellent retainer and have been reborn."

"Sigh. Kaguya's bluffs have begun once again." Yuzuru shrugged, exasperated.

It was an obvious challenge, but Kaguya did not take the bait. The corners of her mouth only softened and slipped up into a bold grin.

Yuzuru sensed this new freedom in her sister and narrowed her eyes. "Admiration. It appears that this was not necessarily a lie. But Yuzuru is the same. I have also obtained a magnificent teacher. As I am now, none can hope to challenge me."

"Oh-ho? Interesting. Well then, a contest as usual!" Kaguya said and dropped her gaze back to Shido.

"Mm." Having changed into pajamas after her bath, Tohka was walking down the hallway when she ran into Origami at the intersection.

The other girl was in loungewear of a simple design, had a small pouch hanging from her wrist, and was carrying a plate covered in plastic wrap. It looked like it held onigiri.

Tohka was curious as to why Origami would have such a thing, but she was honestly never happy to see her, and she would have preferred not to start a

conversation. She looked away and continued toward her destination.

“...Mm?” She furrowed her brow doubtfully. Origami was inexplicably walking with her. “Mm. Why are you following me?”

“I’m not following you. I’m just going in the same direction,” Origami replied matter-of-factly, the look on her face unchanging.

The crease between Tohka’s brows grew even deeper. “You’re not actually going to Reine’s room, are you?”

Origami’s eyebrow twitched.

Tohka was also on her way to Reine’s room—or to be more precise, on her way to take care of Shido, who was resting in Reine’s room.

Earlier, she had gone to Shido’s room wanting to hang out and had been told that he’d caught a cold and was currently being isolated from the other students in a different room. But to think that Origami had gotten a hold of that information, too!

“I’m enough on my own to take care of Shido,” Origami informed her. “You can just go back to your room.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Tohka said. “*I’m* the one who’s going to take care of Shido!”

“I doubt you could.”

“What?!”

“Well, what specifically would you do?”

“That’s obvious. First...,” Tohka began, brimming with confidence.

Shido’s breath caught in his throat.

Kaguya’s face colored slightly before her cheeks tightened as if she had made up her mind, and she started to cheerfully crawl into Shido’s futon.

“H-hey! Whoa! What are you—?”

“Keh-keh... When you have a cold, you have to warm up. And, Shido, according to talk I have heard, you are especially fond of sharing a bed with a lady, yes?”

“H-huh?!” he cried, holding up his blanket with both hands. Well, he *was* a teenage boy. Naturally, he didn’t hate the idea of sharing a bed, but... “Wh-what’s that about? I don’t remember telling you that.”

“No? My retainer told me that when she woke up one morning, she discovered that you had crawled into her futon under the cover of darkness.”

“...Oh. Sorry. That did happen,” he replied, his face stiffening. Most likely—which was to say without a doubt—this “retainer” of Kaguya’s was Tohka. And it was true that Kotori had once arranged for the sleeping Shido to be tossed into Tohka’s bed.

Kaguya chuckled triumphantly and nodded with satisfaction at Yuzuru. Then she tried once more to push her way under his blankets.

“N-no! I said—!” Shido held the blankets down in an attempt to keep her out, and Kaguya’s eyebrows scrunched together.

“Ngh. A-am I...not welcome?”

“...! Th-that’s not what I— Aah, fine!” He put a hand on his forehead, at his wit’s end.

“...and so you lie together and warm him up!” Tohka crossed her arms smugly, snorting with satisfaction.

Yes. She remembered that Reine and Kotori had said that it was important to get warm when you had a cold. Not to mention, Shido liked sleeping with other people so much that he had climbed into Tohka’s bed. She had been surprised then by how sudden it was, but now that he wasn’t feeling well... Well, that was different.

Origami shook her head from side to side, exasperated. “I knew you would be insufficient. You should be good and go back to your room.”

“Wh-what?!”

“You didn’t prepare anything.”

“Prepare?” Tohka said, glaring.

Origami dropped her eyes to the pouch hanging from her wrist. “I’ve prepared a thermometer, cooling sheets, and a towel to wipe his entire body.

No omissions.”

“H-hmph! There are towels in his room! I mean, even I—”

Origami shook her head vigorously. “There’s no point in that. You can’t confiscate the room towel, despite your hard work in wiping his sweat away.”

“M-mm...?” Tohka didn’t really get what Origami was talking about. Something like a groan escaped from her throat.

“And you don’t understand the important things.”

“Important things?”

“Yes. Using a towel is a last resort.”

“What? But then you can’t wipe the sweat away?”

“Personally, I would do it like this.” Origami began to speak matter-of-factly.

While Shido and Kaguya were busy playing defense and offense, Yuzuru took a slow step toward Shido and then ripped the blankets away in one fell swoop.

“Aah?! Wh-what are you doing, Yuzuru?!”

“Ngh! Yes! How dare you interfere with my plan to sleep beside him, you coward!” Kaguya, who had been trying to get under the blankets, cried out in rebuke, as if suddenly sympathetic with Shido’s plight.

But Yuzuru paid her no mind and twitched her nose. “Confirmation. I am able to see sweat forming.”

“Huh? Ohhh... Well, a little, I guess.” Shido nodded. Because he was acting like he had a cold, he had this thick blanket over him, even though it was summer. Naturally, he was going to sweat.

“Point. If the sweat remains as is, it will rob you of heat due to vaporization. It must be wiped off immediately.”

“Oh... Well, I guess. Maybe...”

Yuzuru grabbed one side of his yukata and yanked it open to expose his chest, and his eyes flew open in surprise.

“Ah—”

She laid herself on top of him, stretched out her tongue, and began to lick his chest. The soft, warm, damp sensation tickled. It was so sudden that Shido unconsciously emitted a high-pitched shriek.

“Y-Yuzuru?! Hey...!”

“Wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-what are you doing, Yuzuruuuu?!” Kaguya shouted at the same time, grabbed Yuzuru’s head, and ripped it away from Shido.

Yuzuru licked her lips and got a strange look on her face. “Doubt. Why did you stop me?”

“Wh-why?! What exactly are you doing?!”

“My master taught me that this is the best way to wipe away sweat.”

Shido shuddered. He got the feeling that there was just one person this “master” could have been.

But first things first. He tugged his yukata back over his naked chest and pulled back up the blanket that had been stolen from him.

“...and in this way, you lick away the sweat with your tongue.”

“Wh-what’s the point of that?!” Tohka shouted, sweat beading on her own forehead.

Origami sighed. “I almost feel pity for your impoverished sensibility.”

“Hngh...” For some reason, even though she was the one in the right, Tohka felt an indescribable sense of defeat and gritted her teeth. But she couldn’t let her opponent overtake her now. She shook her head vigorously. “B-but the end result is you need to lie down together after wiping away the sweat!”

“True. You have a point. Sleeping together is a very important factor.”

“You see! I can be useful!”

But Origami once again denied her. “For that, too, I am enough.”

“C-cut it out! I can sleep with him better than you!”

The two girls glared at each other, daggers flying between them.

When Shido yanked the blanket back up, Kaguya got on all fours and peeled

back the corner, as if she'd been waiting for this.

"Keh-keh... It seems that Shido would prefer it if I were the one to sleep alongside him."

"Negative. Yuzuru possesses superior technique in bed. If you are to warm yourself, please use Yuzuru."

"No, this is weird! Something is definitely weird here!" Shido shouted, desperate.

Kaguya and Yuzuru opened their eyes wide.

"What...? Human skin is best when trying to get warm, though?"

"Affirmative. I have heard this."

"Th-this isn't the top of a mountain. I'm fine by myself," he told them, clutching the blanket to his chest to escape their clutches. He looked like a heroine being assailed by a gang of hoodlums.

Yuzuru slapped a hand against her knee as though she'd had a revelation. Then she stood up and untied the obi belt keeping her yukata closed.

""Wha...?!""

Shido's and Kaguya's confusion overlapped perfectly.

But Yuzuru paid them absolutely no mind and calmly looked down at Shido. Her seductive skin and her matching bra and panties peeked out through the opening in her yukata now that the obi had been untied, and Shido's pulse quickened.

"Wh-wh-wh-what are...?"

"Comprehension. Now that you mention it, my master says that if you are to warm someone up, there's no point unless you are touching skin to skin."

"What is this half-baked theory?!" Shido nearly shrieked again.

Yuzuru ignored him and slipped under the blanket. And then she took Shido's shaking arm and tried to slide it into her own yukata.

"Huuuh?!" he cried, his face beet red. He couldn't see it himself, but he was pretty sure that smoke was shooting out of his ears. "H-hey! Wh-what are you

squirming around like that for?!”

“Ignore. It’s better if Kaguya doesn’t know. Beneath the blankets is a space for adults.”

Kaguya gritted her teeth in vexation. “D-don’t you underestimate meeeee!” She slapped a hand onto her own obi belt and yanked it off.

“Wha...?!” Shido’s eyes widened.

Because Kaguya had slipped off the belt with more force than Yuzuru, her yukata flapped up for a moment. And...

“Wh-why are you naked, Kaguya?!”

Yes. Although even Yuzuru was wearing a bra and shorts underneath her yukata, Kaguya had absolutely nothing. Shido quickly closed his eyes.

“...! Shock. To think you would go that far.” Yuzuru opened her eyes wide in surprise.

Kaguya was confused. “Huh? Isn’t this how yukatas work? I mean, Tohka said —”

“No, that might be technically right, but!”

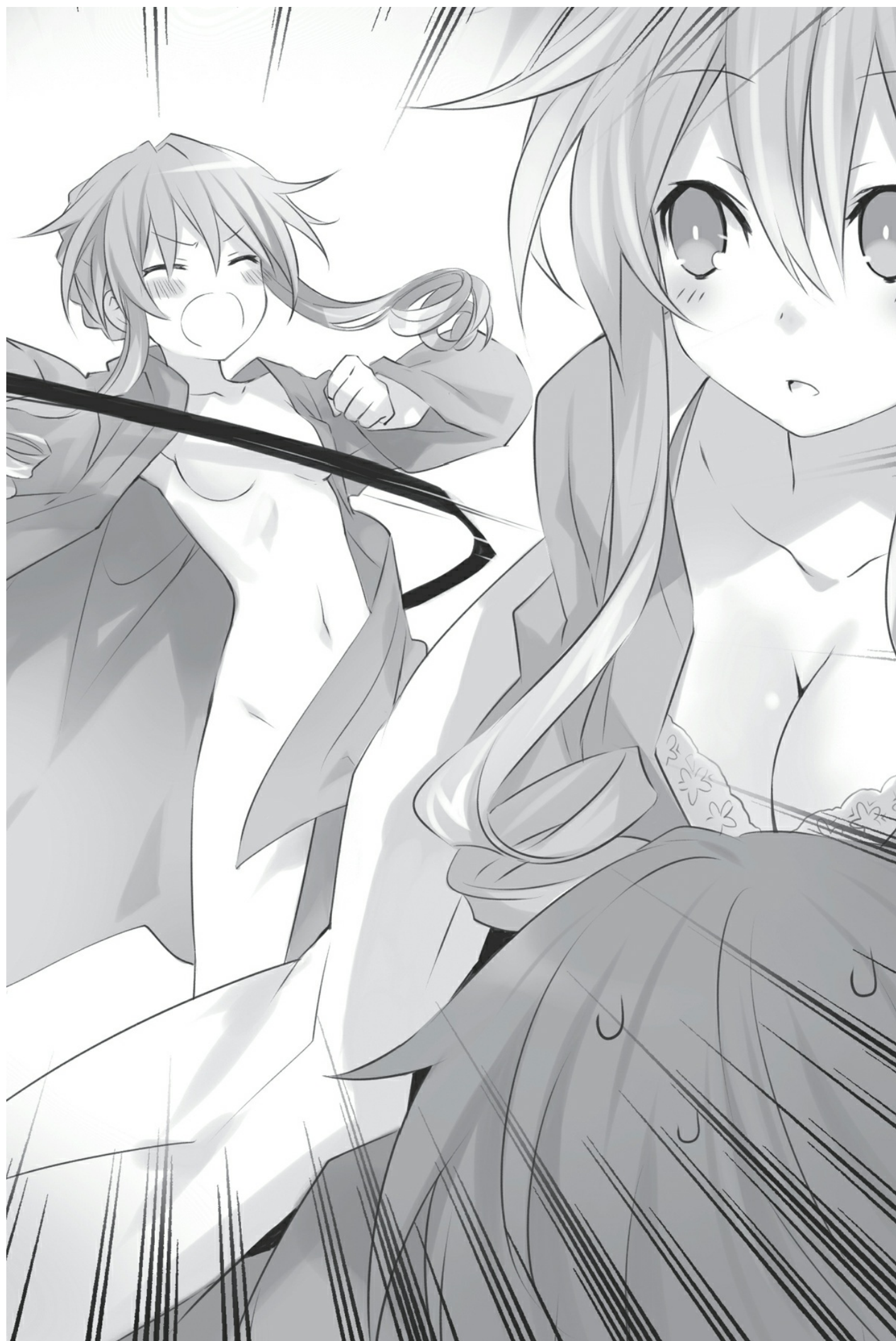
“Y-yaaah! It will be what it is!” Kaguya shouted with an edge of desperation in her excited state and dived onto Shido’s futon. And then just like Yuzuru, she took Shido’s hand and wound her legs around him.

“N-now...Shido. Feel my healing power! I’m warmer than that Yuzuru, yes? See? Yuzuru tends to be chilly!”

“Negative. Given how much sadder your chest is, Kaguya, you would generate less heat.”

“Hngah?!”

In the middle of their argument, Shido exhaled, his entire body tensing. Not only was he pinned down on the futon, but they were pressing in on him from either side. He could keenly feel the skin glued to his, the breath in his ears, the faint scent of sweat wafting by. He was in serious trouble. He didn’t think he could stand much more.



“Restraint. Kaguya, Shido’s face is turning red.”

“What? Do you mean to say that even though we’re both warming him, his condition is deteriorating?”

“Hypothesis. He might be allergic to Kaguya. Please try moving away from him.”

“D-don’t make it sound like I’m some house dust!”

“Counsel. Setting aside the jokes, we must do something.”

“Something? What are you saying we should do?”

“Suggestion. Now that you mention it, although she said ‘direct,’ don’t you think the skin contact area should be limited?” Yuzuru had no sooner spoken than she abruptly untangled the hand she had wrapped around Shido’s left arm.

Phew. He let out a sigh of relief. But in the next instant, he tensed up again.

The reason was simple. Yuzuru’s hand had started to undo the obi fastening his own yukata.

“Hey! St—wh-what?!” he shrieked with teary eyes, but Yuzuru’s hand did not stop. In fact, not to be outdone now that she had noticed what Yuzuru was doing, Kaguya started actively trying to peel his yukata off, her face reddening as she did.

“E-eeeeaaaaah! Eeeeeeeeeek!”

“Quiet! Calm yourself! You’re making it harder to get this off!”

“Agreement. It is not as though you are an innocent here.”

She wriggled around under the blanket, and Shido’s yukata was tossed off to the side. To be honest, he didn’t know exactly what had happened. It was almost like sleight of hand.

But that was not the end of the nightmare. Next, Kaguya’s and Yuzuru’s fingers settled upon Shido’s last bastion of defense—his underwear.

“N-now... This is the end.”

“Affirmative. Let’s do it together.”

Excited and breathing heavily, the two girls yanked at the fabric.

“N-nooooooooo?!” Shido’s high-pitched shriek echoed through the room.

Having fallen into a stalemate against Origami in the hallway, Tohka suddenly heard a scream and frowned. “Mm? Did you hear something?”

“You must be having auditory hallucinations. This is serious. You should go back to your room. Leave Shido to me.”

“Are you still saying that?!” Tohka jabbed a finger at the plate Origami was carrying. “What about that plate?! No one needs *that* for Shido’s recovery!”

“A late-night snack for Shido,” Origami replied as if this were the most natural thing in the world. “You have to keep your strength up when you have a cold.”

“H-hmph! You show your true nature! People who have colds are supposed to eat rice porridge!” Indeed, Tohka was sure that Reine and Kotori had said something about that before.

But Origami wasn’t taken aback in the least. “When you have a cold, you should have something easy to digest. That much is obvious,” she responded dispassionately.

“What...? Then why would you—?”

“I will turn these into paste at Shido’s side and pour it directly into his mouth. There’s no issue here.”

“Wh-what...?” Tohka frowned. It didn’t look like Origami was carrying any other tools, so how was she going to make the rice balls into a paste? And what exactly was “pour directly” supposed to mean?

While she pondered this, Origami began to move silently.

Tohka gasped and grabbed her shoulder. “St-stop! *I’m* going to take care of Shido!”

“Let go. Shido’s waiting for me.”

“As if! There’s no way—”

While Tohka and Origami argued in the middle of the hallway, three shadows ran up and crouched down in a circle to surround them.

“Wh-what...?” Tohka jumped and looked at the girls deployed around her. She knew these faces. Ai, Mai, and Mii had made their way over from her own room.

“Hey, hey, you two! Full of vim and vigor again today!”

“But hanging out like this? You’re in everyone’s way!”

“How about you leave this contest to us?”

The three girls said one after the other, crouched down and swaying from side to side like a runner eager to steal a base.

“Mm...?”

“...”

Tohka and Origami looked at each other curiously.



Watching from where she was plastered to the wall of the inn hallway, Ellen confirmed that her target, Tohka Yatogami, had gone into the room. She pressed a finger to her earpiece and started giving her report.

“This is Adeptus One. I have confirmed target entry into room.”

“Roger. Shall we deploy Bandersnatches?”

“Three outside the room, please, just in case. But it appears that Master Sergeant Origami Tobiichi is also inside. Please exercise caution in the range of Territory deployment.”

“Roger. Bandersnatch One through Three en route.”

Ellen was about to give her next instruction over her earpiece when something came flying out of the room suddenly at her face. “Hw-aaugh?!”

She tumbled backward.

“Ngh! What was that?!” She sat up, holding her nose, and froze. “They can’t have discovered me?”

Although it hadn’t done any real damage, that blow had definitely been aimed at her.

But there was no way. Ellen focused her own thoughts and shook her head. The Bandersnatches hadn't taken any conspicuous action yet, and Ellen hadn't done anything herself. But if the Spirit had special powers of perception...

Regardless, the threat hadn't changed. Ellen was about to leave when...

"Oh! I found the photographer!" A happy-go-lucky voice from inside the room pinned her to the spot.

"Oh! You're right, there she is. Ellen, right?"

"Don't let her get away! Capture her!"

Shrieking, three girls raced out of the room to surround her.

"Wh..." Ellen gritted her teeth.

She had seen these girls before. They were students staying in the same room as the target. She cursed her carelessness. Most likely, the Spirit had taken them over and was now controlling them. There was no other explanation for this abnormal behavior.

Ai-Mai-Mii grabbed on to Ellen's arms and legs and carried her into the room.

"Ngh. What are—?"

"Heeeey! The photographer said she's in!" Ai said.

"Perfect!" Tohka shouted. "We'll bury them together!"

"You've got guts."

Tohka and Origami glared at each other. They lifted something up high above their heads and threw it.

"Nice try! Photographer barrier!" Ai dropped Ellen's legs and shrank down as if to hide behind her.

Objects like hardened fabric struck Ellen in the face, one after the other.

"Bwah!" Ellen exhaled like she'd been shot in the chest and collapsed on the spot.

"E-Elleeeeeeeeeeen!!"

"Are you okay?! It's just a flesh wound!"

“Stay with us! You’ve got family waiting for you back home!!”

The very people who had used Ellen as a shield were now dramatically pretending to wipe away tears.

In Ellen’s confused mind, she considered the projectiles that had brought her down.

“...Pillows?” she muttered, and the war began anew.



Once the staff meeting was over, the homeroom teacher, Tamae Okamine, stopped at Reine Murasame’s room, next door to her own.

One of Tamae’s own students, Shido Itsuka, had fallen ill suddenly, so he was being prudent and resting there. If he was sleeping, then it was better not to wake him, but...as his homeroom teacher, she had to check in on the situation. Tamae knocked quietly on the door.

“Itsuka? I heard you have a fever. Are you all right?” She slowly opened the door.

“St-stoooooop!” Shido Itsuka himself flew out of the room, screaming pathetically. Naked, for some reason.

“...”

“Huh...?” Shido saw Tamae and stared, stunned.

In the next moment...

“Eeeeeaaaaaaaaah?!”

Their screams echoed throughout the inn.

Chapter 4

Cross-Counter Heart

Day broke on the second day of the school trip.

Shido had made his way to Akaru Beach on the northern part of Arubi Island. Gouged out of the territory in the spacequake thirty years ago, the beach carved out a striking arc in the ground. Tourist guidebooks dubbed it Crescent Moon Beach, which Shido thought was an impressive name.

“...”

Strangely, he couldn't see anyone resembling a tourist there.

Maybe that was to be expected. When he was on his way to the changing room with everyone else, Reine had stopped him and taken him in a rental car to a private beach on one end of Akaru Beach. She had gone out of her way to arrange the trip since there was a good chance of his classmates interfering in *his mission* otherwise.

“Haah... This is incredible.”

The sky was clear. The bright sun reflected off the almost perfectly clear water, causing Shido to narrow his eyes.

He sounded like an old man as he gently stroked the scratches on his cheeks and chest, in contrast with the lively young people frolicking in the public beach areas.

A slight pain raced along his skin, and he frowned. “Owww...”

Right when he'd thrown open the door to escape from Kaguya and Yuzuru, Tama had come at him with a slashing attack. Thanks to Kotori's Spirit power, Shido would recover from even serious wounds, but it appeared these injuries weren't something he could handle under his own power. If he went into the water as is with the scratches and all, he would no doubt shed tears at the

fierce purification of the seawater.

“At any rate, it’s not like I get to do what I want here.” He sighed.

Right on cue, a sleepy voice came through the earpiece in his right ear. “...*Shin, it looks like Kaguya and Yuzuru have finished changing. You ready?*”

He took a deep breath. “Yes.”

“...*Like I told you yesterday, they’ve both been given earpieces. They haven’t been swimming before, apparently, so I’d like to suggest they do a bunch of things. Go along with it as much as you can.*”

“R-roger.”

“...*To prevent crossed wires with my advice to them and my conversation with you, I have to close the line for a minute. Will you be okay?*”

“Yes, I’ll do what I can... To be honest, though, I’m a little nervous.” He smiled helplessly, remembering the events of the previous day.

“...*Well, no one can say you didn’t have a rough go of it yesterday. But I’m watching your back to a certain extent. Okay, the mission’s starting. Don’t forget to compliment them on their swimsuits.*”

With those words, the transmission ended.

“Keh-keh... So this is where you were hiding?”

“Discovery. I found you, Shido.”

That distinctive way of speaking. He didn’t need to look to know. He slowly turned around anyway.

As expected, Kaguya and Yuzuru were standing there. Kaguya was wearing a black bikini decorated with white lace, while Yuzuru was the opposite in a bikini of white fabric with black lace. They were almost eerily alike. If they were to walk along the beach looking like this, more than one guy would feel compelled to call out to them.

“H-hey. Those suits are great on you. You two look amazing.”

When Shido complimented them just as Reine had instructed, Kaguya’s face flushed and her eyes opened wide like she was surprised, while Yuzuru looked

down at herself, stunned.

But Kaguya soon shook it off and crossed her arms. “K-keh-keh-keh... I—I suppose I do. I suppose so. But don’t get the wrong idea. This garment pales before my actual appeal.”

“Gratitude. Thank you very much. That makes me happy,” Yuzuru agreed.

And then Kaguya and Yuzuru each arched an eyebrow abruptly and put a hand to an ear.

“...Hmm?”

“Confirmation. Yes.”

Shido looked closely and saw the same model of earpiece that he wore in their ears.

“Keh-keh... I see. Understood.”

“Acknowledgment. I have understood.”

He grinned unconsciously. He guessed it was just because they weren’t used to this. Watching both of them become so preoccupied with their earpieces was funny for some reason.

Soon enough, they took their hands away from their ears and turned back to him.

“Shido. Given that I live in eternal darkness, this Sonnenschein is too much. I will permit you to implement a protective miasma to block the holy light.”

“Huh...?”

“Petition. Please apply this thing called sunscreen.”

“Ohhh... Sure.” He finally understood, thanks to Yuzuru’s explanation. But the hard part came after the understanding. Applying sunscreen meant...

“Fwah... Then proceed. I trust that you have my back,” Kaguya said, clearly using the wrong words for the occasion, and handed him a bottle of sunscreen.

“Request,” Yuzuru followed up. “Please do this.”

He wondered where exactly they had gotten the sunscreen, but he quickly

noticed a rest station nearby, offering beach umbrellas and blankets. Most likely, Reine had set it up in advance.

The girls traded meaningful glances and then lay facedown in the shadow of a beach umbrella. They unhooked their tops to expose their pale backs to Shido.

“Uh. Umm...” Sweat poured down his face as he looked at the backs side by side.

Apply this...? He would have to run his hands directly over their skin.

Perhaps impatient, Kaguya and Yuzuru touched their earpieces and began to speak in quiet voices.

“Hey. Shido’s not getting on board. Is there something else going on here?”

“Question. What is ineffective?”

“...! Crap!” He frowned. Their goal today was to give Reine’s advice credibility. If he balked here, the mission would end in failure. “O-okay! Here I go!”

Kaguya and Yuzuru looked toward him for a moment and nodded.

“Phew...” He let out a sigh of relief. It seemed that he’d managed to keep from making Reine’s advice worthless.

However...

“Keh-keh... Now, Shido, this goes without asking, but you will start with me, yes?”

“Question. With which of us will you begin the application of sunscreen?”

“Huh? Oh, uh, well.” He watched as they exchanged a look, and then Kaguya abruptly grabbed hold of Yuzuru, flipped her over, and got on top of her, pinning Yuzuru down with her arms and legs so that she couldn’t move.

“Shido. Now,” she commanded. “My miasma of protection!”

“Inattention. Hngh...”

A triumphant smile spread across Kaguya’s face as Yuzuru let out a pained groan.

This was all happening while they had their bikini tops unfastened, so Kaguya

and Yuzuru's breasts were pressed up against each other, and it was strangely erotic.

"Would you hurry?!"

"R-right!" Shido dropped to his knees, squeezed out a bit of sunscreen into his hand, and touched Kaguya's back.

"Mm! Aaah...!" Kaguya shuddered, her voice sweeter than ever before.

"S-sorry... Is it cold?"

"I-it's fine. Just...do it..."

"O-okay..."

But every time Shido moved his hand, Kaguya writhed like it tickled, crying "Aaah!" and "Mm!" in an excessively sensual way.

Held fast by Kaguya, Yuzuru also let out something like a moan of admiration at her twin's reaction. Then she gasped, her eyebrows jumping up on her forehead when she found a momentary opening in Kaguya's guard to flip them over.

"Counteroffensive. You were wide open."

"Hngh!"

Now it was Yuzuru holding down Kaguya, and she turned her eyes toward Shido. Having been one-upped by her sister, Kaguya panted heavily, seemingly lacking the strength to resist Yuzuru.

"Petition. Shido, hurry. Do Yuzuru, too...please."

"Ungh...?! R-right." He knew it was just sunscreen, but his heart skipped a beat at this strangely suggestive pose and dialogue. But he managed to calm himself down somehow and began to rub the sunscreen on Yuzuru's back.

"Spa...sm. Unh... Ah!" Yuzuru said in a strained voice, breathing quickly through her nose.

When Shido timidly moved his hand to follow the arch of her back, she shuddered as though unable to stand it any longer.

"Uh. Um..."

“Ad...miration. You are very good at this...Shido.”

“N-no fair! Me next!” Having finally gotten her breathing back under control, Kaguya sat up and reversed their positions.

But when Shido began to apply the sunscreen once more, she shivered again.

“Counter. Offensive... I won’t allow it.”

Now Yuzuru twisted and flipped Kaguya onto the blanket, sunscreen smearing across it.

“Why you—! What are you doing?!”

But Kaguya wasn’t going to let this go unchecked. She quickly grabbed Yuzuru’s hands and retook her place on the top.

After several cycles of this, they ended up on their bellies on the blanket, glaring at each other, now slippery with sunscreen.

“Um. In that case...” Shido rubbed his hands together to get sunscreen on both before letting his fingers crawl up their backs at the same time.

““Unh! A-aaaaah!”” they cried out together, threw out their arms and legs, and began panting as if they had just run a race at top speed.

“A-are you two okay?!” he asked, confused.

The two girls locked empty eyes.

“Who could be this good...and have no self-awareness of it...?”

“Shiver... The hands of God... A true wolf.”

“H-huh...?”

Then they got another transmission from Reine. They pressed on their earpieces, took a deep breath, and began to speak quietly.

“H-hmm. Next is...watermelon splitting...? Get Shido to blindfold me?”

“Con...firmation. After spinning around and becoming dizzy, await the direction of progress?”

“H-hang on! What are you trying to do here?!” Shido cried out, his eyebrows leaping up his forehead.

He felt like he heard another voice besides Kaguya's and Yuzuru's coming from somewhere. For a second, he thought it was Reine over his earpiece, but that wasn't it.

"Shido!"

"T-Tohka?!" He whirled around at the familiar voice. He could see only the ocean behind him, but he was sure he'd heard the voice coming from that direction.

He squinted and saw Tohka swimming among the surging waves. Her form was all over the place, but she was incredibly fast. And behind her, Origami was following along at a beautiful crawl.



Observing her target, Tohka Yatogami, on the coast, Ellen sighed as she massaged her shoulder with one hand. It had been a long time since she'd done any intense exercise without a Territory, so her muscles were a little achy.

Those girls had kept her trapped in that pillow fight until late the previous night, and before she knew it, she'd succumbed to exhaustion and fallen asleep in the same room as her target.

Today, she was determined to get back on track and observe Tohka, but there were naturally a lot of eyes around during the day. It didn't look like she'd be able to catch the target alone. Perhaps it was better for her to wait until evening again.

"—Hmm?" Ellen frowned.

The target had been restless for a while, whirling her head around as if searching for something, but now she abruptly turned toward the ocean. "Oh, Shido! You're over there!" she called out and dived into the water.

That by itself would have been one thing, but the real issue was that the target (and for some reason Origami Tobiichi) began to swim off in a straight line.

"*Arbatel*. The target is on the move. Can you follow her from there?" Ellen asked her earpiece, and the operator's voice came back to her immediately.

"I have eyes on her. It appears she's heading for the opposite shore."

"The opposite shore?" Ellen called up a map of Akaru Beach. She and the Raizen students were on one end of the shore of the crescent moon. She could barely see the opposite shore, which looked so small in the distance, but Tohka and Origami were swimming in a direct line toward it. "What's over there?"

"It seems to be a private beach. I can confirm three people there now."

Ellen licked her lips. She didn't know why Tohka and Origami had suddenly started in that direction, but this was a favorable turn of events for her. Unlike this swimming area open to the general public, there would be fewer bystanders over there, and she could count on their classmates to testify that they had swum off into the ocean. This was her best chance to have Tohka become a missing person.

"I'll head over there right away. Please have Bandersnatches follow."

"Roger." Ellen shouldered the camera she'd been holding and stood up.

However...

"Oh! Miss Photographer! Hey! Over here! Shoot this!" someone called out from behind, and Ellen glanced in that direction.

She saw a number of boys and girls playing in the sand on the beach. A boy with hair set in place with wax was buried up to his neck, and from the neck down, a strangely posed body had been created with sand. Worst of all, Ellen had spotted the three girls who'd dragged her into the pillow fight the day before.

"I do apologize, but I—"

"Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat?!"

"Come on! Take a picture, Ellen!"

"We're friends now! We spent that passionate night together!"

"...Uh-huh." She sighed in annoyance, readied her camera, and went hard on the shutter. "Is that good? I'm actually in a hurry."

"What? Take more!"

“I closed my eyes in that one!”

“And, like, where are you going? Come play!”

“...” Ellen started walking, trying to ignore them, but Ai-Mai-Mii raced over, slipping on the sand, before yanking her camera off her shoulder. “What are you doing? Please give that back.”

“No way! I feel bad that you’re the one always shooting us. We’ll take some of you, Ellen!”

“Th-there’s no need for that. Please give it back.”

“Relaaax! It’s fine! Don’t be so polite!”

“I’m not being polite. I do have something to do, so—”

“Yes! A table for one!” Mii said while students materialized out of nowhere and hoisted Ellen up into the air to bring her down to the shore.

Ai-Mai-Mii grabbed shovels and *ksh! ksh! ksh!* In the blink of an eye, they had dug out a human-sized hole, into which Ellen was safely deposited before she knew what was happening.

“Ngh! What exactly are you—?! Wait. That is some unbelievably fast digging!”

“Heh! We practiced our high-speed digging techniques in the woods behind the inn yesterday until the ground was nothing but holes!”

“Digging in sand’s like digging in tofu for us now!”

“Okay, gang! Get in there and do it!”

““Yaaah!””

With Ai’s shovel in the lead, sand flew at Ellen from all directions.

“Pwah! Wh—p-please stop!” Her resistance completely in vain, Ellen was soon buried.

The students packed the sand and shaped it like a sculpture.

“Hngh. I really don’t have time for this,” Ellen grumbled. “Please let me go.”

“Now, now, what’s the rush?”

“Let’s just get one good picture.”

“And I promise we’ll pad your boobs, so yeah.”

Ellen looked down and saw that sand was strangely piled up on her chest area, just as Mii had said... This was an unwelcome favor.

When she looked more closely, she could see the face of the boy buried in the sand earlier on her lower right. The body they’d built up beneath Ellen’s face was that of a dominatrix, whip in hand, while the boy’s body was a naked man on all fours with his ass turned toward her.

After moving a short distance away, most likely to fit both of them in the frame, Ai pressed the camera shutter.

“...” Ellen’s cheeks tightened.

The buried boy—she thought his name was Hiroto Tonomachi—turned his face toward her. “Ha-ha! Ellen, right? Looks like we’re in a real pickle here, huh?”

“Uh-huh,” she replied lifelessly.

Tonomachi’s cheeks reddened as he continued. “It’s like, nah! Ha-ha! Maybe, like, you could call it...destiny or something.”

“...”

For the first time in her life, she wanted desperately to spit on another person.



Tohka and Origami reached the shore and trotted over to Shido and the girls. They were both wearing the swimsuits Shido had bought for them last month. Tohka in dark colors, Origami in a white bikini. The suits looked great on them, as they should after the close scrutiny each had undergone.

“Here you are, Shido! I was looking for you!” Tohka cried.

“Shido. Why are you with the Yamai sisters?” Origami asked, suspicious.

Shido smiled vaguely and took a step back. “Oh. Well... Um. Ha-ha-ha! The truth is, we got lost...”

Having somehow managed to get their breathing back under control and their

bikini tops back on, Kaguya and Yuzuru spoke up.

“Oh? Why, if it isn’t Tohka. Keh-keh... What a treasure you are, to come to your master’s feet of your own accord. I praise you.”

“Admiration. Master Origami, why are you here?”

Now that he was thinking about it, Kaguya and Yuzuru had ended up sharing a room with Tohka and Origami, respectively, so it was no surprise that they knew each other. Although he was a little concerned—most people didn’t enter master-servant relationships with their friends.

“Oh! Kaguya, you’re here, too?” Tohka said. “What were you doing?”

“Keh-keh... We were about to smash a shell steeped in the darkness of the abyss to perform the rite of the demon frolicking, spitting out crimson blood and sinew.”

“Wh-what’s that? Sounds scary.”

“Explanation. Kaguya says we are going to split a waterme—”

“...Could you hang on just a second?” a sleepy voice from behind interrupted Kaguya.

Shido turned to find Reine wearing a hoodie over her swimsuit. Perhaps blinded by the direct sunlight, she narrowed her eyes and held one hand up to shade them, her head wobbling. She looked anemic, a patient ready to topple over at any second. But he knew that this was her normal state of being.

“Reine...?” He furrowed his brow doubtfully. She was supposed to be advising Kaguya and Yuzuru through their earpieces.

The two Spirits likely had the same question. They stared curiously at Reine and put hands to the devices in their ears.

“...Sorry, I forgot to get a watermelon. But we have more people now, and there’s a court over there. How about some beach volleyball instead?” She pointed at a spot farther down the beach.

Although suspicious at first, Kaguya and Yuzuru quickly read between the lines of this suggestion and jumped up.

“Hmm, well, fine. Whatever we do, I will obviously stand at the peak.”

“Agreement. This is acceptable. It will be Yuzuru who wins in the end, after all.”

They met each other’s eyes, and even though it wasn’t a race, both began to run at the same time.

“Oh!” Tohka also took off running, as if inspired by this.

The eyes Origami turned on Shido and Reine said she still wasn’t entirely on board, but perhaps intuiting that she would get no further explanation, she started to walk along the beach.

Reine and Shido started after her.

“So, Reine?” he asked. “Why did you come out from behind the curtain?”

“...Oh. I decided to switch to Plan B because of the unexpected appearance of Tohka and Origami. If I’d had the Ratatoskr crew here, then this might have been nothing, but...there are limits to what I can do on my own.”

“Plan B?”

“...Yes. The strategy is to deepen the bond between the three of you and cultivate a sense of camaraderie by playing together on the same team.”

“The same team? Will those two actually play nice, though?”

“...Well, I have an idea. Watch.”

When Shido and Reine reached the magnificent beach volleyball court, Reine crouched down and picked up what looked like a tube sitting on one of the poles.

“...Now, let’s split into teams,” she said. “Three per team. Draw straws.”

“Mm?”

Reine held the tube out to Tohka first and had her take a stick from inside.

Shido slapped his thigh. It all made sense now. He was sure that those straws were set up so that he, Kaguya, and Yuzuru would end up on the same team.

“...Okay, Shin, you too.”

“Oh, right.” He drew one of the remaining two straws. And then stared at it, baffled. “Huh?”

There was no number or symbol written on it. Instead, the tip of the stick featured a wild caricature of a boy’s face.

“...Now then, if you drew Gregor, Jackson, or Spencer, you’re over here. If you got Alexander, Abraham, or Anthony, head to the other side of the court.”

“Reine, which one is this?”

“What’s this?”

Tohka and Origami showed their straws to Reine, confusion on each of their faces.

“...Mm-hmm. This is Gregor. And this is Spencer.”

Kaguya and Yuzuru also showed Reine their straws.

“...That’s Alexander and Abraham. Go on over there.”

“...” Shido looked again with dubious eyes at the drawing on his own stick (probably Anthony). He couldn’t tell how it differed from the other drawings at all.

Team A: Kaguya, Yuzuru, Shido.

Team B: Tohka, Origami, Reine.

Kaguya and Yuzuru and Tohka and Origami. Four out of six players found these team compositions to be incredibly unsatisfactory, but the game started with the promise that Reine would tell the winning team “a secret that Shin doesn’t want anyone to know.”

“All right! Here we go!” Tohka cried out, full of energy, and launched a serve from one end of the opposite court.

However...

“Wha—?!”

Pok! Hyooo! The ball easily tore through the net and kept going like a bullet. Shido immediately shifted to one side.

When the ball spiked into the spot where he'd been standing, it spun around like a top on the sand before finally coming to a stop.

"Reine! How many points was that?!" Tohka shouted.

"...Zero."

"Mm, so no extra points for technical skill...?"

"...You're confusing this with a different kind of contest."

"Keh-keh." Kaguya laughed. "You're quite powerful, hmm? I'll have to get serious—"

"No, you don't. You don't have to get serious." Shido shook his head vigorously. All the extra lives in the world couldn't keep him alive if every volley was going to be like that.

"Hmph, how dull. Well, fine. It's our serve next, yes?" Kaguya reached for the ball where it had dug itself into the ground. And then she launched it into their opponent's court with good form, just as expected.

"Oh! Here it comes!" Tohka started for the ball.

"Stay out of the way," Origami snapped and received the ball.

Behind her, Reine tossed it up, while the incredible mass of her chest jiggled up and down. Shido's focus unconsciously shifted to that motion and stayed there.

"Warning. You're in danger," Yuzuru told him.

"Ah...!" His eyes flew open wide. Before he knew it, Tohka was right there, doing a powerful jump shot over the net.

"Hyaaaah!" With a scream, she whacked the ball with the palm of her hand. The ball shot off like a bullet and scraped Shido's cheek as he stood there staring off into space.

"Whoa?!"

"Ngh! Keep your wits about you, Shido!"

"Agreement. You're in the way."

Kaguya and Yuzuru called out from behind him as they dived to catch the ball.

Because they both ran to the same spot at the same time, they slammed their heads into each other and promptly collapsed in a heap. The ball bounced inside the court and rolled off along the sand.

“Gaaah! Wh-what are you doing, Yuzuru?!”

“Objection. I would say the same to you. Please stay out of my way.”

Kaguya and Yuzuru glared at each other, each pressing a hand to her forehead.

“...Nice, Tohka. That got you a point.”

“Oh! Really?!”

The mood on the opposite side of the court was jubilant. Tohka and Reine high-fived. Origami tried to ignore them, but Reine took her hand and forced her to participate in the moment.

Kaguya and Yuzuru paid this no mind and continued to talk at each other.

“No matter how you look at it, that was in my area just now. Don’t go overstepping the boundaries!”

“Objection. I thought that the simpleton would not make it in time.”

“H-how dare you!”

“Counterattack. What?”

“H-hey, just calm down...” Shido wedged himself in between them, while Reine whispered something to Tohka and Origami on the other side of the net.

“Ohhh. Is that it?” Tohka said.

“I will acquire the promised object,” Origami vowed, and both girls coolly stared down at Kaguya and Yuzuru.

“Hmph.” Tohka snorted. “I guess Kaguya and Yuzuru are no big deal, after all!”

“Contrary to expectations,” Origami agreed. “Quite an overreach to come and challenge me with so little skill.”

““...!””

The provocation was obvious, but Kaguya and Yuzuru both twitched in response.

Reine whispered to Tohka and Origami once again. Shido felt like he heard her saying, “Trash them harder. That’s what they do in a real game.”

“Kaguya’s a poopypants, and Yuzuru’s real crummy! You’re both dodos!”

“You XXX. Go ahead and try to XXXX and XXX. Perfect for losers like you maggots.”



The ridiculously childish taunting and the ridiculously dispassionate cursing flew through the air from the opposite court.

““ ... ””

Kaguya and Yuzuru narrowed their eyes at this fanning of the flames.

“Hey, Yuzuru?”

“Reply. What is it?”

The girls glanced at each other.

“...You wanna do it?”

“Confirmation. We shall do it.”

But the next server, Origami, appeared relaxed as she picked up the ball and knocked it beautifully toward one corner of the court.

“Yuzuru!”

“Response. I know.” Yuzuru dived at the last minute and received the serve with near-perfect form.

Kaguya knocked the ball up into the air and returned it to their opponents. It was a coordinated play in stark contrast to their earlier bungle.

But the opposing team didn't miss a beat. Origami caught the ball as it came down toward the sand. “Ms. Murasame.”

“...Okay, I got it.” Reine tapped the ball. It was the same pattern as before.

Shido focused his attention on the court so as not to get distracted by her chest and saw Tohka jump up high again.

“Yah!” she shouted and smashed the ball from some distance above him.

“Shido! Stop it!” Kaguya called, and he hurriedly put his hands together, ready for Tohka's shot.

But the ball didn't fly into his hands, but straight into his face. It bounced hard off his nose and rebounded up into the air. His brain rattled in his skull, and he saw stars.

“Gnyah?!”

“All right!” Tohka cried gleefully. “The ball hit him, so that means we get Shido on our team now, right?”

“...No, I’ve never heard of that rule.”

Apparently, Tohka had been deliberately aiming at Shido this whole time.

“Praise. That was nice,” he heard Yuzuru say through the fog clouding his consciousness. “Construction. Kaguya?”

“Let’s!”

Yuzuru got down on one knee, locked her hands together, and turned her palms upward. Kaguya ran up, and the instant she set a foot on those hands, Yuzuru launched her up into the air.

“Wha...?!”

“...!”

He heard Tohka and Origami cry out from the enemy court.

“Hyaaaaaaah!” Kaguya spiked the ball, and it whizzed through the air like an arrow and slammed into the enemy court. It was an impressive shot.

“Yes! Tied! You see that?!” Kaguya pumped a fist while still airborne, forgetting to maintain her usual dramatic manner of speech.

When her feet finally touched the ground again, she exchanged an easy high five with Yuzuru.

“Whoo-hooooo!”

“Delight. Whoo-hoo.”

Yeah! That was perfect, Yuzuru. I went *boing!* *Boing!*!”

“Affirmative. That was an incredible hit. I’d expect nothing less from you, Kaguya.”

“No, no, that was all you—”

They both gasped and looked away from each other.

“Hmph... How vulgar to celebrate in such a fashion. Consider yourself honored to have touched my foot.”

“Displeasure. There’s an odor on my hands now. It’s stinky. It’s a cross between natto and fermented herring.”

“I-it does *not* smell that bad!”

And they began to fight again as if they had just remembered that was what they were doing. It was a strange mental shift.

But Shido didn’t have the opportunity to observe it in any real way. He heard a cry of “Shido! You okay?!” from above before the last shred of his consciousness slipped away into darkness.



“Owww...” Rubbing the lump on his head, Shido staggered toward the washrooms on the beach.

When he said he was going, more than one girl said that it was too dangerous for him to go alone, given that he had only just been knocked out by a volleyball, so she would go and “help” him. However, he had politely—but with the same force with which his head had hit the sand—refused these offers.

“...*Are you okay, Shin?*” He heard Reine’s voice in his right ear and smiled in a tired way.

“Well...more or less, I guess,” he replied. “How are things there?”

“...*To be honest, I can’t say yet. I don’t know how much more we can fan the flames of their—*” Reine abruptly cut herself off.

“Reine? Is something wrong?” he asked, frowning, but he soon learned the reason why.

...Because Kaguya popped her head out from one side of the washrooms.

“Kaguya? What are you doing here? I thought you were with everyone else.”

“Keh-keh... When I move with the blessings of the tornado, such a short distance has no meaning.”

“...Okay, well, maybe, but I was more asking about the why,” he started and then gasped and bent forward. “I—I told you I didn’t need any help!”

“Uh...?” Kaguya looked stunned for a second, and then her face turned red. “I

—I obviously was simply saying that for the sake of the situation! Don't take it seriously!"

"O-oh. Yeah?"

"Obviously! Wh-why would I do...that...?" She faltered and looked away. "A—! Anyway! That's not what I'm here for!"

"R-right!" He agreed automatically before lowering his voice and speaking to his earpiece. "Reine, did you tell her to do this?"

"...No, I didn't say anything."

"Hey, don't ignore me," Kaguya grumbled.

"Oh, sorry." He hurriedly turned back to her. But...there was one thing here that bothered him. He scratched his cheek as he looked at her. "Are you okay to keep talking like that?"

"Ah!" Kaguya cried, suddenly recognizing that she'd made a mistake. She cleared her throat with an awkward cough and struck a pose. "Keh-keh... So you were deceived by my deception, hmm? I found it quite humorous to have you dancing in the palm of my hand."

"..."

"Why are you looking at me weirdly?" She pursed her lips in a pout, and Shido smiled and tousled his hair.

"Oh, uh... I was just wondering why you make such an effort to talk like that is all."

"I'm not making any effort! This is normal!"

"You're breaking character again."

"Ah...!" She looked surprised again and then let out a sigh. "It's just, you know. I'm a Spirit and supposed to be, like, super amazing or whatever. So I need that level of dignity or, like, something like that, I think."

"I dunno about that one." Shido frowned. He had met several Spirits, and he felt like there hadn't been a girl like that among them.

"Of course that's how it's supposed to be. I mean, I've got this awesome

origin story, and the dramatic setting's already in place, you know? So I have to be the right kind of character."

"Well...if you say you're good with it, that's all that matters," he said. "So? What did you need?"

"I'll keep going like this 'cause it's a hassle to keep changing. Anyway, me and Yuzuru are in the middle of a battle over you. And the decision's going to be made tomorrow."

"Yeah... You're right. Wait, you're not actually—that's not fair." He frowned, thinking that Kaguya had come to plead her case with him.

But she said something entirely unexpected.

"Shido. Tomorrow...pick *Yuzuru*."

"...Huh?" His eyes flew open.

"Not 'huh.'" She shrugged and continued, "There's nothing to hesitate about, is there? I mean, Yuzuru's super cute. She might not be the most personable person ever, but she's really nice, she's got big boobs—she's a total moe character, every man's dream come to life. And on top of that, if you pick her, she'll probably do all kinds of stuff for you to show you her thanks, you know? There's no reason not to pick—"

"H-hang on a second!" Shido tried to get his chaotic thoughts in order. He didn't understand what she was saying. Well, he understood the words coming out of her mouth. But the fact that she was telling him to choose Yuzuru the next day...

"Kaguya, you... You said that whoever won this contest would become the main personality of Yamai."

"Yeah, and?"

"...You said the loser would be incorporated into the winner and disappear."

"Yeah, sounds about right."

"So then why—?" he asked, his throat tightening.

Kaguya scratched her head and laughed. "Hmm. Well, it's not like I *want* to

disappear. But I want Yuzuru to live more. I want her to see way more things and have all the fun she wants in this world.”

“...! You...” Shido groaned, pained, but Kaguya paid him no mind.

“And, like, if you hadn’t butted in that day, this would have all been over with.” She snapped a finger out at him. “We would’ve had a flashy collision, and I would’ve gone down, crying ‘You got meeeeeee,’ and it would have been a done deal.”

Shido grimaced. His chest hurt, as if a hand were squeezing his heart. “S-so then the whole thing about whoever gets me to fall for her first?”

“Oh, that? That’s ‘cause Yuzuru’s obviously the cute one. In this type of contest, she’s sure to win, no question.”

“But then...,” Shido started, but Kaguya stepped forward and held her index finger to his lips.

“I’m not really looking for your opinion here. All you have to do is be all ‘Yuzuru, you’re so cute, Yuzuru, you’re so lovely, hah-hah, *pant-pant*.’” Kaguya narrowed her eyes and lowered her voice. “Otherwise, I’ll destroy this island and all your friends.”

Shido gulped. He had almost forgotten the danger Spirits could pose until the look she gave him and the words she spoke brought it all rushing back.

While he was frozen in place with fear and tension, Kaguya relaxed and took a step back, whirled around, and struck a cool pose.

“Keh-keh... Well then, farewell, human. What we have spoken of is now a covenant of blood. Should you misstep, know that you will be burned with the Fegefeuer Flammen right to your skull!” she said and left.

Shido could only stand rooted to the spot.

“...*Shin*.”

After a while, he heard Reine’s voice in his ear and he gasped.

“Reine, just now...”

“...Yes, I heard. This...has gotten quite complicated, hmm? If this isn’t some

tactic and it's how Kaguya really feels...then there's a real possibility that she won't accept a kiss tomorrow, even if we fan the flames. So that she can let Yuzuru win."

"Ngh." Shido clenched his hands into fists. She was right. This was very serious. But more than that, Kaguya's resolve to kill herself in order for Yuzuru to live weighed heavily on his heart.

He couldn't stand there gaping forever, however. He began to walk, practically dragging his heavy feet. If he was gone too long, Tohka and Origami—and more important, Yuzuru—would become suspicious—

"Check. Shido, please stop," called out a voice from behind.

"...?!" Shido jumped.

That was definitely Yuzuru's voice. For a second, he thought he was hearing things, but no. At some point, the other Yamai had come to stand right behind him.

"Y-Yuzuru?"

"Response. Yes, it is I."

The inflectionless voice. The calm mannerisms. The all-pervading cool.

"Wh-what's going on?" he asked, his temperature rising again.

Yuzuru turned her face in the direction in which Kaguya had disappeared. "Question. What were you and Kaguya talking about?"

"...!" Shido's breath caught in his throat. His heart, having started to calm, began pounding again. "What? I mean... Uh."

Yuzuru shrugged and sighed. "Withdrawal. It's fine, actually. I get the basic idea."

"Y-yeah? You do?"

"Affirmative. She said that you should select me in the judging tomorrow, yes?"

"Oh... Uh." He was about to continue, but she held out her hands to stop him.

"Question. I don't mind that, but did Kaguya do something at the time?"

“Do...something?”

“Example. I am asking if, for instance, Kaguya held you and ran her tongue along your neck or pressed your face in between her breasts or thrust her hand into your swim trunks and groped your groin.”

“Sh-she didn’t do any of that!” he cried out.

“Disappointment.” Yuzuru shook her head in exasperation. “That’s where Kaguya falls short. Her endgame is weak. If she actually tried to seduce you, she would be able to take you down like you were a monkey in heat.”

“...” He felt insulted somehow, but he also felt like there was something off in the way Yuzuru was speaking. She sounded almost like—

“Petition,” she said, interrupting his thoughts. “Yuzuru has a favor to ask of you, Shido.”

“Favor...?” A shiver ran up his spine. He swallowed hard. His throat prickled, and his heart started beating even faster. *Thump, thump*. He felt as if his blood vessels had expanded and his blood was being pushed forcefully through his body.

In contrast, his thinking was clouded; he felt almost drunk. In this state, one thing popped up into bright life in his mind, the words he’d heard a few minutes earlier.

“Affirmative. It’s exactly what you think.” Yuzuru nodded and continued without any enthusiasm whatsoever.

“Petition. Shido, you must pick *Kaguya* in this contest.”

“...”

He couldn’t speak. He had perhaps more or less expected this from the moment Yuzuru appeared.

Yuzuru cocked her head to one side. “Question. I sense something off in your reaction.”

“O-oh, it’s nothing...”

“Demand. I would ask this above all else. You must please choose Kaguya

tomorrow. Promise.”

“Wh-wh-why would you...ask that?”

“Explanation. Because Kaguya is far superior to Yuzuru. There is no need to hesitate. You also know very well that Kaguya is adorable. She does have a tendency to put on an act, but she is very earnest and considerate. Her body is so slender, it seems that it might break at the merest touch, but the only description possible for the pleasure of squeezing it is *heavenly*. I’m sure that if you select Kaguya, she will allow you to do all kinds of things. Please, it has to be Kaguya.”

“But if Kaguya wins, you’ll—,” Shido started, and Yuzuru lowered her eyes and nodded. As if to say she had already thought long and hard about all of it.

“Kaguya is the Spirit that is most suited to being the true Yamai. You must have already realized that, Shido. Kaguya is extremely appealing. There is no reason why you should not choose her.”

“B-but the two of you were fighting so hard...”

“Exposition. She may not look like it, but Kaguya is very shy. If you don’t hold her feet to the fire, she cannot show her true potential.”

“...”

When Shido was speechless, Yuzuru walked over to him and whispered in his ear, “Reminder. Please say you will choose Kaguya tomorrow. Otherwise, misfortune will befall your friends.”

Yuzuru walked away, leaving behind the same threat that Kaguya had.



“...”

When it was time for the group to gather at the meeting point, Ellen was finally released from the sand, and she sat now covered in grime, knees pulled to her chest, gazing out at the sea from the coast.

The target had already returned to this side of the beach and gone to the changing rooms to get out of her swimsuit. She had passed by Ellen, who had been buried in sand (where the body built up out of sand for her had seen

improvements to make it more of a bodybuilder style), and she had been holding her stomach as she laughed out loud, so there was no mistake there.

Also, the way that boy Hiroto Tonomachi had stretched out his hands respectfully after being unearthed a minute ahead of her had rubbed her the wrong way, so she shoved him into the hole where she had been buried and covered him in sand again.

"...Chief, um." She heard the awkward voice of an operator in her earpiece.

"...I'm fine. There's no need for concern. It's fine. My first choice was nighttime anyway. There is absolutely no problem here. I will catch her during this trip."

"O-of course..."

The kindness in the operator's voice was harder to bear.



Shido's supper that day tasted like nothing. And it wasn't because the inn's chef was being overly thoughtful about the health of the guests or catering to his own tastes, et cetera, et cetera. It was simply that Shido's mind was somewhere else entirely.

He finished his meal without a word to anyone else and walked slowly down the hallway, turning various ideas over in his mind.

The words that Kaguya and Yuzuru had spoken to him that afternoon at the beach were still going round and round in his head. In order to let her other self live, she would choose annihilation.

He hadn't been able to understand what they were thinking right away.

But, for instance, if he knew his little sister, Kotori, would die if he didn't sacrifice his own life, he was sure he'd do it without a moment's hesitation. And that decision wasn't the product of some sort of narcissistic impulse, like a fixation on self-sacrifice or devotion to another. It was simply that the question wasn't a choice at all. His brain would automatically decide that there was only one answer without any conscious input from him.

"...do."

So he understood painfully well Kaguya's desire for Yuzuru to live and Yuzuru's desire for Kaguya to live.

"Shido."

Actually, it wasn't just that. He was maybe even happy to discover that Kaguya and Yuzuru were thinking about each other in this way. But...

"Hey! Shido!"

"Ngh?!" He jumped in surprise.

"Honestly! So you finally heard me?" Without his noticing, Tohka had come to stand beside him, clad in a yukata, and now she pursed her lips out in a pout.

"T-Tohka... Where'd you come from?"

"I've been walking beside you for a while now." She looked hard at his face.

"Hmm? What?"

"Oh." She averted her eyes, and then the corners of her mouth slid up, and she grabbed his hand. "Shido, do you want to go outside for a bit?"

"Huh...?"

"I want to see the ocean at night." She tugged on his hand.

"H-hey, whoa." Shido braced himself and braked hard when Tohka tried to urge him forward. "No, it'd be bad if we just went out on our own. I mean, it's almost time for the teachers to come round and check on us."

She sighed through her pout. "Sorry, Shido. I kind of lied."

"Huh?"

"It's... I dunno, we came all the way here for our school trip, and it's like...we haven't really talked. So I wanted to talk, just me and you."

"...!"

"Is that...bad?" she asked, looking up at him, head tilted slightly downward.

"...Oh. Is that—I mean." If there was a man alive who could say no to that, Shido would have liked to lay eyes on him.

A second later, Tohka beamed as she dragged him away.

“Okay! It’s what you’ve all been waiting for—tiiiime for card games! Wait. Huh?” Ai jumped into the room and then looked around quizzically.

She could only see Mai and Mii.

“Where’s Tohka? And Kaguya?” she asked.

Mai, who had been lying down flipping through the trip itinerary, and Mii, who had been boxing with the string hanging down from the ceiling light, turned their faces toward her.

“Mm, Tohka’s with Itsuka. Getting cozy with him, proly?”

“I saw Kaguya. She was hiding behind a wall, watching them.”

Ai stroked her chin thoughtfully. “No way. Could this be the vaunted love triangle? Eek! It smells like a daytime soap opera!” She grinned and then dropped her eyes to the deck of cards in her hand. “But, well, in that case, we don’t have enough people. I thought we could play Tycoon.”

The other girls laughed.

“Yeah, you’d want five people for that.”

“Why don’t we ask Yuzuru?”

“Oh, I stopped by their room, but Yuzuru wasn’t there, either. I found Ellen, but then I lost sight of her almost right after. Where’s everyone running off to anyway?” Ai let out a sigh and began to shuffle the cards. “So how about a game of Sevens then?”

“Haah! Haah!” Pressed up against a wall outside the inn, Ellen took a few deep breaths. And then she peeked inside to check if the coast was clear before letting out a sigh of relief.

“That was very close,” she muttered to herself and wiped the sweat off her forehead. She’d seen her target, Tohka Yatogami, go outside with a boy, and she had taken a step to go after them when the voice of her natural enemy rang out behind her: *“Eeeellllleeeen! Let’s hang ouuuuuuut!”*

She’d hurriedly withdrawn from the spot, but her heart was still pounding.

“W-well, anyway, this is my chance.” After peering into the inn one more time

just in case, Ellen reached up to her earpiece. “*Arbatel*, can you see me? The target’s moved away from the inn. I’m in position.”

“Roger that.”

“And...please have one Bandersnatch on standby in this area.”

“We can do that, but why?”

“The AST’s Master Sergeant Tobiichi is inside. I’m sure I’m worrying for nothing, but...in the event that you do see suspicious movement on her part, please handle it.”

“Roger.”

After hearing the operator’s confirmation, Ellen stepped into the darkness of night.



There was no one on the beach. It was so quiet that the hustle and bustle of the day seemed like an impossible dream. Although the private beach Shido had spent the afternoon on had been quiet, too.

He strolled with Tohka along the coast near the breakwater, chatting about this and that.

“And then last night, I had a pillow fight with Ai, Mai, Mii, and the others.”

“Ha-ha! You had a pillow fight?”

“Mm-hmm. At first, it was a contest with Origami Tobiichi to decide which one of us would take care of you, but then we got really into it, and we ended up going until we both got tired and fell asleep.”

“...O-oh yeah?” Shido smiled. If they had settled the fight earlier or if one of them had had any energy left, the previous evening’s events might have invited even greater disaster.

...It was weird. They were just chatting away about nothing in particular, and yet he felt his mood lighten somehow.

After they had walked a little ways, Tohka abruptly looked back. “So, Shido. What happened?”

“...!” He felt his heart leap up in his chest. “What do you mean, what happened?”

“Oh, I don’t know the details, but...something *did* happen, right?”

“Wh-why would you think that?” he asked, and Tohka put her index finger to her chin.

“It’s just like, you seem like you’re having some trouble. Oh, right! Umm, it feels kind of like, just a little bit like that time with Kurumi.”

Shido’s eyes grew wide.

Kurumi Tokisaki. The vilest Spirit, who killed people simply because she wanted to.

When he learned her true nature the previous month, he had been overwhelmed by this new reality, and Tohka’s words had given him hope again.

“Oh! If there’s nothing, that’s okay, too. Maybe I’m just overthinking things.”

“...” Shido sighed heavily. “Tohka, did you maybe ask me out here for that reason?”

“Mm... Well, it’s—I dunno. No, I did actually want to talk to you, you know?” she said, her cheeks coloring. She looked so cute, he could hardly stand it, and his own face softened.

“Hey, Tohka? Can I tell you something?”

“Mm? Mm, anything.”

Shido nodded and began to speak slowly. “So Kaguya and Yuzuru? This sounds totally far-fetched, but the truth is, they’re...”

He explained that they were Spirits, that they were fighting, and that the loser would lose her life, all while deftly glossing over the who-is-more-appealing contest.



At first, Tohka nodded appreciatively, but soon a look of surprise came across her face. “What...? So that’s it?”

“Yeah. And this is the main bit here. This afternoon...Kaguya told me to pick Yuzuru.”

“What? That’s absurd. Then Kaguya will—,” Tohka started and then shook her head slightly. “No. I guess I get it. If someone told me that you would die if I didn’t die...I might do that, too.”

“Tohka...”

She gasped, her shoulders jumping up. “Nn—f-forget I said anything! Keep going!”

“R-right...” He scratched his cheek. “And... So actually, right after that, Yuzuru said the same thing to me. That I should pick Kaguya.”

“What?” Tohka’s eyes grew wider. “So then, Kaguya and Yuzuru...?”

“Yeah.” He nodded. “They both want to let the other live. Even if it means their own selves will disappear, Kaguya wants Yuzuru to survive, and Yuzuru wants that for Kaguya. And it’s, like, I don’t know what to do anymore.”

Tohka was quiet. After a while, she furrowed her brow as if she was having some difficult thoughts. A few seconds later, she opened her mouth, a strange look on her face. “Hey, Shido? This is what I think, but—”

Krnch. He heard a sound up ahead like someone stepping firmly on the ground, and Shido lifted his face.

When he saw the girl there in a yukata, he froze.

Kaguya Yamai.

“K-Kaguya?!” he cried. “What are you—?”

“Just now...what did you say?” Kaguya interrupted him, her voice quiet but colored with an intense rage. “Yuzuru...said that? Huh...? I don’t get it. What are you talking about?” she said, almost like she was talking to herself as she gritted her teeth and clenched her fists.

A cold wind began to blow around them.

“Kaguya, calm d—,” Shido started, his heart gripped with panic.

But Kaguya appeared not to hear him. She clenched her hands more tightly, and her whole body began to tremble.

Krnch. He heard new footsteps from behind and whirled around to see Yuzuru, her face lowered in the same way as Kaguya’s.

“...?! Yuzuru?!”

“Repetition. Demand. Kaguya said...to pick Yuzuru? Did she say that?”

“Yuzuru, just listen—”

““How *absurd!*”” the two girls snapped simultaneously, their voices angry roars, and a terrible blast of wind radiated out from both of them.

“Whoa?!”

“Ngh!”

Shido and Tohka were knocked to the ground by a sudden gust from behind. They pulled themselves up again, crouching behind the nearby breakwater, and turned their eyes back on the two girls.

Surging eddies of air whipped around Kaguya and Yuzuru, and their outfits transformed into particles of light. In their place, bondage gear materialized, buckled around them, and manacles clamped around their wrists and ankles.

Astral Dress. The absolute armor that protected a Spirit.

And that wasn’t the end of it. Kaguya raised her right hand in front of her, while Yuzuru did the same with her left.

An inorganic wing materialized on Kaguya’s right shoulder. A metallic luster crawled down her arm from there to the back of her hand, finally forming a lance so massive, it easily exceeded her height. “Raphael. El Re’em!!”

At the same time, an identical metallic wing sprouted from Yuzuru’s left shoulder. Armor rolled down to sheathe her arm, and a sword appeared in her hand, with a diamond tip and a chain affixed to the end of it. It almost looked like a dowsing pendulum. “Concord. Raphael. El Na’ash.”

Kaguya readied the lance while Yuzuru held up the blade with the pendulum

at its tip.

Shido's face grew pale. They had definitely just manifested their Angel, the most powerful weapon a Spirit possessed.

A number of thoughts raced through his mind all at once.

“*“Absurd.”*” They had both shouted the same word. Were they talking about Shido, who had spilled their mutual secrets? Or about Tohka, who had been walking alone with Shido?

It appeared that the correct answer was neither.

Kaguya and Yuzuru glared at each other with eyes like knives.

“You’ve done something truly absurd, hmm, Yuzuru? Telling him to pick *me*?”

“Objection. What is *your* intention here? I don’t recall asking you to do that for me.”

The wind grew even stronger.

“It’s no use, hmm? It really is hopeless. I thought we could settle this quietly and properly with this sort of contest, but I forgot to factor in your idiocy.”

“Agreement. Your level of stupidity really does test one’s patience. So it’s come to this. It was asking too much to have someone else end a battle we started.”

They readied lance and pendulum, respectively.

“I suppose so. Looks like in the end, we’ve just got to do it ourselves. Perfect. I have never been angrier at you than I am in this moment.”

“Counterattack. Nor have I. I cannot completely hide my irritation and anger at your imprudence, Kaguya.”

“And how shall our battle be decided then?”

“Obvious. You already know.”

They spoke as one now.

“*“The one who falls wins.”*”

There was only one way to victory: fight...until one of them fell.

“Stop—,” Shido yelled, but he was ignored.

The two girls charged each other, a storm rising up around them.



Krr, krr, krr! The wind roared like the earth rumbling in an earthquake, and the exterior walls of the inn began to creak.

The reactions of the students inside were varied. Someone turned on the TV to check the weather report; another quickly took shelter underneath a blanket, frightened by the rumbling; still others laughed that it was a good thing the storm hadn't hit during the day. Naturally, however, not one of them attempted to leave the inn with this squall outside.

With the exception of Origami Tobiichi.

“...” She silently slipped on her shoes and put a hand on the door of the inn.

The reason was obvious. When she'd gone looking for Shido earlier, she had obtained the information from Ai, Tohka's roommate, that she had seen Tohka leading Shido outside.

Origami's movements were quick. She slapped down the hand of Ai inviting her to play cards and ran to the inn's entrance, taking in a warning from Tamae not to run in the halls along the way. A little thing like a storm couldn't stop Origami.

She didn't like the fact that Shido had gone out alone with Tohka. But more than her personal annoyance, being outside so close to the ocean in a storm was dangerous. She had to bring him back as soon as possible.

The wind was strong, but not so strong that she couldn't walk normally.

“...?!” Sensing a presence behind her when she stepped outside, she immediately leaped back.

Sure enough, a metallic *clang* rang out from the place where she had only just been standing.

“Wha...?” She frowned the tiniest bit as she looked over to see what had appeared in that spot.

A thing in the shape of a human was standing there, fists pressed on the

ground.

For a moment, Origami thought it was someone from the AST. It was equipped with a CR unit that closely resembled the official AST equipment, and being so close to it, she felt a twinge of the same headache she got when her Territory was deployed. The thing had likely activated the Realizer.

But it wasn't the AST. Whatever it was wearing this CR unit was clearly not human.

The inorganic external appearance would have been impossible for a living creature. Rounded legs designed with an emphasis on efficiency and efficiency alone. A machine that took the shape of a person, what most people would describe as a robot or a mechanical doll or something along those lines.

"What on earth...?" Origami's throat constricted around her words. A machine shouldn't have been able to control a Realizer, not without using human brain waves. A robot deploying a Territory was just...

"Ngh..."

The puppet jumped at her, interrupting her thoughts.

She barely managed to dodge it and jumped as far back as she could.

"What are you?" She tried talking to it without much hope.

But of course, the doll did not respond. It merely attacked once again.

"...!" Evading by a hair, Origami noticed something curious.

As far as she could tell, the doll was equipped with a basic loadout like a laser blade and a gun. But for some reason, it wasn't using them on her. It only punched at her with its bare hands, like it was trying to capture her uninjured. Or block the way to keep her from going any farther.

"...! Out of my—," she shouted, annoyed, and leaped back. While she was dancing with this doll, Shido was in danger.

"...Origami Tobiichi, what are you doing? It's dangerous out here. Hurry back inside."

She heard the sleepy voice of her teacher, Reine Murasame, from the

direction she had come. Maybe someone told her that Origami had gone outside.

“...! Ms. Murasame, go back—”

But before Origami was finished speaking, the doll whirled its head around toward Reine.

“...Hmm? Who are you? Sorry, but my student...,” Reine started to say to the doll and then stopped. She may have realized at that moment that she was not speaking to a human.

But it was too late. When the doll’s target changed from Origami to Reine, it yanked its round and thick arm up and charged the woman.

“Ngh!” Origami gasped, kicked at the ground, and knocked Reine aside.

In the next instant...

“Kah...haaah!” She flew backward helplessly, the doll’s heavy blow catching her squarely in the stomach.

The pain in her side was unspeakable, and she had trouble catching her breath. Her consciousness grew hazy, and her vision blurred.

“Ms. Murasame...hurry...run...”

Origami watched the shadow of the doll closing in on Reine’s back before slipping completely into darkness.



“Commander, an intense gale has sprung up near the coast of the northern part of Arubi!” Deep Love, Minowa called out at the same time as the alarm went off on the bridge of *Fraxinus* hovering in the sky above Arubi.

“A gale...?” Kannazuki stroked his chin dubiously as he stood next to the captain’s chair. Wind was a flow of air. Under normal circumstances, it did not just suddenly come into being at a fixed starting point. “Any word from Analyst Murasame?”

“Nothing!”

He frowned. She was supposed to contact them if there were any problems

on her end. "Please open a line to her. If it's nothing, that's all fine and good."

"Roger!" The crew member tapped at the console but soon came back with a dubious voice. "The transmission...won't go through. There's a possibility that someone has blocked communications!"

"Hmm?" Kannazuki arched an eyebrow. Jamming that they wouldn't detect until they tried to send a transmission. What on earth...?

But he made a decision at lightning speed. In mere seconds, he was issuing orders to the crew.

"We have no choice then. It *is* a little dangerous, but we'll have to send someone to speak with her directly. Drop altitude to a thousand meters, transfer a crew member to the northern district of Arubi, and deploy Yggdrafolium to maintain communications. Confirm the safety of Analyst Murasame and Shido."

""Roger!"" the crew shouted in response and started tapping their consoles.

He heard a quiet rumbling, and a faint sense of buoyancy enveloped him, as though he were riding in an elevator. In minutes, the airship had dropped from fifteen thousand meters above Arubi to one thousand.

"Arriving at target coordinates. No Permanent Territory response."

Fraxinus was equipped with eight control Realizers and ten large basic Realizers, to ensure that a Territory was constantly deployed around the airship. This Territory manipulated visible light to keep the enormous body of *Fraxinus* invisible. Additionally, the Territory was set so that the moment it came in contact with a plane or a bird, it automatically avoided a collision.

But when transferring personnel or materials to the surface with the transporter in the lower part of the ship, or when the independent unit Yggdrafolium equipped at the rear of the ship was deployed, this invisibility was interrupted for a few seconds. Thus, when carrying out transmissions at low altitudes with Yggdrafolium as the relay point, it was necessary to check carefully for any signs of aircraft in the area and to monitor whether any of them had detected *Fraxinus*.

"Excellent. Then please deploy Yggdrafolium."

“Roger.”

The invisible wall cloaking *Fraxinus* slowly melted away.

In the same airspace, at an altitude of one thousand meters above Arubi, a crew member’s shout rang out on the bridge of the DEM 500-meter class airship *Arbatel*. “Captain! I’ve got a contact on the radar!”

“An airplane?”

“No... An airship!”

“...What?” Seated in the captain’s chair, Paddington frowned dubiously as an image of the sky was displayed on the main monitor.

There was no doubt that it was not an airplane but an airship. The sharp form of the ship’s body was due to the several small heat sinks located in the rear, making it look almost like an enormous tree.

“Where on earth did it come from?” he demanded.

“The signal appeared out of nowhere. Most likely...it had to have had Invisible deployed.”

“What? What’s its call sign?”

“Unknown, sir. I can’t confirm that it is a DEM ship.”

Paddington grimaced and stroked his beard. “An airship equipped with Invisible? Impossible. DEM Industries only just succeeded recently in using a Territory for that.”

Yes. Invisible was cutting-edge technology, made possible for the first time with DEM’s new Realizer, the Ashcroft β -series. There were only three ships currently equipped with the device, including the *Arbatel*.

On the monitor, what appeared at first to be a heat sink peeled away from the ship, hovering independently in space. In the next moment, the ship in question melted into the sky and disappeared once more as if its job was done.

“The signal’s gone!” cried the crew member monitoring the radar.

There was no doubt then. This mysterious ship was indeed equipped with Invisible. He had confirmed it with none other than his own eyes. But there was

no way something like that could exist—

“Impossible!” Paddington’s eyes widened. He *had* heard something along these lines before. The name of an organization that possessed the only Realizers outside of DEM. “Ratatoskr.”

The crew on the bridge gasped.

It was no surprise that those belonging to the second DEM enforcement division—the shadow DEM, the direct action group—would have heard this name. Paddington had been told of its existence himself. By none other than Isaac Westcott.

According to that tale, there existed an organization with more advanced technology than DEM.

To wit, there existed an eccentric group that was trying to resolve the spacequakes through peaceful means.

In other words, they were the enemy of DEM.

“If discovered, exterminate immediately.” Paddington chuckled. “I see it’s my lucky day.”

He stood up and shot out orders at the crew.

“Ready main guns! Divert Ashcroft-beta numbers ten through twenty to magic generation! The target is...the unknown ship that vanished!”

“C-Captain, perhaps we should ask the chief—,” a crew member said with an anxious look.

Paddington clicked his tongue in annoyance. The very idea that that whelp of a girl’s words were weightier than his own!

“No need! The Bandersnatches are sufficient for the chief’s mission! She’ll have nothing to complain about as long as she has them!”

“R-roger...” The crew member began to tap at their console, overwhelmed by the captain’s intensity.

Soon, a low rumble of operation echoed across the bridge, and *Arbatel* changed direction.

“Main weapons, magic charging complete!”

“Release Invisible! Change Territory properties to anti-attack!”

After hearing the calls of confirmation from his crew, Paddington turned a finger toward the monitor and half murmured, “Fire.”

With a rumbling roar, the bridge of *Fraxinus* began to shake violently. Static raced across the monitors, and shrill emergency alarms sounded. And then a signal appeared out of nowhere on the radar screen, and a massive shadow came into view on the exterior monitor.

“...!” *Fraxinus* crew member Hinako Shiizaki automatically covered her face with her hands. Her mind was in chaos. She’d never felt a shock like this on the airship before.

Her reaction was reasonable. In fact, some part of the crew still on the bridge reacted in the exact same way that she did.

She knew that *Fraxinus* was equipped with weapons in anticipation of the worst-case scenario. She had been told when she joined Ratatoskr that battle was certainly possible, and she’d been given combat training.

But she’d never experienced actual combat before.

“Left flank Territory, twenty percent shrinkage!”

“Output from basic Realizer AR-008 is dropping!”

“Slight damage to the ship! What on earth—?”

The cries of the crew rang out on the bridge.

“Wh-what was that?!” Hinako shrieked.

Still standing next to the captain’s chair, Kannazuki put a hand to his chin as he reviewed the situation. Despite the severe jolt the ship had taken, he remained perfectly composed and in place.

“Hmm. It seems we’ve been attacked. The fact that they were able to come this close without us noticing any radar contacts... I suppose that means that they also have Invisible deployed. Strange. It’s supposed to be technologically impossible with anything other than our Asgard Realizers.”

“Heat source confirmed! Second attack is incoming!”

“Oops. Release Invisible and Avoid. Please divert all magic generated by the basic Realizers to the Protect Territory.”

“R-roger!” a crew member shouted out, and the Territory deployed around *Fraxinus* changed from Invisible to Protect.

Another shock rocked the bridge.

“Ngh! We’re still getting hit like this—even with the defensive barrier up?!” Kawagoe grimaced in his seat on the lower level of the bridge.

He was right to be shocked. Such a powerful impact should have been impossible now that they had diverted the magic from Invisible to the defensive barrier.

“The fact that they are coming out with such a direct attack must mean that they are quite confident in their ship’s performance,” Kannazuki said, sounding utterly unperturbed. He grabbed his shoulders and writhed around. “Mm. That’s nice, it tingles. Oh! Don’t stop!”

“...” Hinako half glared at him while she operated her console. This man really was hopeless. If this kept up, the ship would be knocked out of the sky. She opened a secret line and placed an emergency call.

Before long, the figure of Kotori Itsuka popped onto her screen.

“...Shiizaki? What’s with the secret line? What’s going on?”

“It’s an emergency!” Hinako cried. “Please, Commander, you have to take over!”

Kotori’s face immediately grew stern. *“You’re not telling me that Kannazuki made some weird choices again and soured Tohka’s mood, are you?”*

“No, it’s more serious. Any more of this and we’ll—”

“So then what happened? ...! Wait. Kannazuki didn’t go to the inn for the school trip himself and put on a strip show in front of Shido and Tohka, did he?!” she asked fearfully.

“No, that’s not it.” Hinako shook her head. “It’s an enemy! An unknown

airship is attacking us! If we don't do something, *Fraxinus* will be..." She was desperate. Naturally. Whatever else was going on, her own life was on the line.

But Kotori rolled her eyes as if she had lost all interest in the conversation.

"What, is that all?" She sighed. *"I was totally convinced that idiot had done something. Don't scare me like that."*

"Th-that's— isn't the ship the most important thing...?!" Hinako cried.

Kotori spread her hands out to stop her. *"It's okay. You don't have to worry about that."*

"H-how can you be so calm...?" Hinako wailed.

Kotori shrugged. *"I mean, you've got Kannazuki there, right?"*

Chapter 5

A Light to Rip Through the Wind

A violent gale razed the woodlands that separated the north and the south sections of Arubi. The green leaves that signaled the advent of summer were ripped to shreds and sent flying, whirling in the air as if they'd been tossed into a blender. Slender trees were ripped out by the roots and launched like javelins.

The act of a tyrannical Berserker. The incarnation of senseless violence, annihilating everything within reach.

Who on earth could have imagined that the cause of this sudden storm was a massive quarrel between two girls?

"I've thought this for a while now! You always try to handle everything all by yourself!" Kaguya shouted as she threw her enormous lance. The tip began to spin at high speed like a drill, generating a powerful tornado.

The lance swept toward Yuzuru as if to hurl her away with this maelstrom.

"Objection. I will return those words to you wrapped up with a bow on top!" Yuzuru replied with the utmost calm, despite the destructive tornado closing in on her, and made some complicated gesture with her left hand.

The pendulum in her hand wriggled as if it had a life of its own and formed what looked like a magic circle in front of her. After neatly shielding her from Kaguya's tornado, it returned to its original chain form and looped around Yuzuru.

"You're too gentle! I'm ready to cede the seat of main personality to you, so be a good girl and take it!"

"Refusal. I never had any interest in being the main personality."

"—Ngh! Do you have any idea how hard it's been for me to lose realistically in our contests so far?!"

“Objection. It’s the same for me. More than once, I was frustrated that you did not come in for the attack even though I worked hard to leave myself open.”

“Yamai is the tornado queen who rakes all of creation! You’re the only one suitable for that title!”

“Negative. That is incorrect. Kaguya, you are the one who should bear the name of the true Yamai.”

“But you can fly faster than me!”

“Kaguya is stronger than Yuzuru.”

“But you have better taste than me!”

“Kaguya’s skin is smoother.”

“But you’re cuter than me!”

“Objection. I cannot accept that. Kaguya is obviously cuter than Yuzuru.”

As they kind of quarreled, kind of not, the spinning top of Kaguya’s lance collided with the blade Yuzuru’s chain had woven itself into. The two forces were perfectly matched. The howling winds grew wilder still and slammed into Shido.

“Ngh!” He somehow managed to withstand the blow, curled up around Tohka. Without the protection of Spirits, he likely would’ve been blown away by now. The damage from the battle of the Yamais—or actually, to be more precise, the damage from the side effects of their battle—was that incredible.

Each time their Angels clashed, a powerful gust whipped through the area and ripped up everything nearby.

But Shido shook his head as if to clear away these thoughts, and staring, almost glaring at the two girls, he managed to push back against the wind and stand up straight.

“Why...?”

Kaguya wanted Yuzuru to survive; Yuzuru wanted Kaguya to survive. They were both thinking of the other. And it was for this—if it was for the sake of the

other, they would not hesitate to sacrifice their own lives.

And yet... Why?

“Why does it have to be like this?!” Shido shouted, practically ripping his throat open. “Stop! Both of you! You love each other, don’t you?!”

Perhaps the roaring wind drowned his voice out, or maybe they were so absorbed in the battle that they couldn’t hear him. Or maybe they were ignoring him. He couldn’t tell which it was, but either way, Kaguya and Yuzuru remained locked in mortal combat.

“Ngh!” He gritted his teeth and covered his face with his hands. He was utterly helpless.

“Shido! Watch out! Something’s coming!” Tohka cried from his side.

He looked around and frowned. “Wha...?”

In the few seconds that he had been chasing Kaguya and Yuzuru with his eyes, ten human figures had popped up to surround Shido and Tohka.

Actually. Wait. They had the same head and limbs attached to bodies as human beings, but they were clearly a different shape.

Smooth heads like full-face helmets attached to slender bodies, legs with joints that bent the opposite way from a human knee braced against the ground. Their arms were large in contrast, giving them a strangely unbalanced form. And all of it was composed of metal armor polished smooth like the surface of a mirror. Not to mention the CR units strapped to them.

“Wh-what the...? What *are* they?!” The slightly hunchbacked dolls sent a shiver of fear racing up his spine as they crept toward him and Tohka.

“DD-007 Bandersnatch—I suppose that doesn’t mean anything to you, though.”

A girl stepped out from behind the dolls. It was the photographer for their school trip, Ellen Mathers.

“E-Ellen?” Shido asked.

“Mm. What are you...?” Tohka said.

Ellen nodded. “At last I’ve got you all alone, hmm, Tohka? It seems you have a plus one, but well, we can work with that.” She glanced at Shido and gave him a dismissive snort. “But I am surprised. To think those two are Spirits. And not only that, top-priority target Berserk. It seems I’ve landed a big one after a string of bad luck.”

“Wha...?” Shido furrowed his brow. This girl had just called Kaguya and Yuzuru “Berserk.” “You... Who are you? AST?!”

“! Oh-ho...” Ellen arched an eyebrow, showing interest in Shido for the first time. “So you’ve heard of the SDF’s anti-Spirit squadron? Unfortunately, however, your guess is incorrect.”

She held up a hand, and the dolls she called Bandersnatches dropped down and came charging at Shido and Tohka.

“Ngh!” He squeezed his eyes shut.

But when a few seconds passed and no impact shook his body, he slowly, curiously opened his eyes.

“Mm. Are you okay, Shido?!”

Tohka had manifested a limited Astral Dress around her yukata and was clutching the shining sword Sandalphon in both hands. She had apparently unlocked some portion of her Spirit power the moment the Bandersnatches had come flying at them and mowed down their attackers with her weapon.

Ellen opened her eyes wider in excitement. “Princess. So it really *is* you.”

“You even know Tohka’s code name...” Shido frowned. He had zero time to spare if he was going to stop Kaguya and Yuzuru, and yet now he was faced with this unknown enemy.

But Ellen didn’t seem to care one bit what Shido thought. She turned to Tohka and held out a hand. “Tohka. Would you come with me? I promise you the warmest of welcomes.”

“Shut it!” Tohka half screamed as she leveled the tip of Sandalphon at Ellen.

“H-hey, Tohka,” Shido said. “That’s an actual human being. You can’t—”

“No.”

“Huh...?”

Tohka glared at Ellen, her face tense, as she continued. “I noticed it the first time we faced her. I get a gross feeling from this woman. It’s like... It’s like the feeling I get from the AST, but super concentrated.”

A smile appeared on the corners of Ellen’s mouth for the first time. “That’s quite a description.” She spread her hands slowly as if challenging Tohka, and a faint light enveloped her body.

An instant later, she was wearing a wiring suit and a CR unit. The suit was different from the AST’s, and what appeared to be mechanical armor covered every part of her body. On her back was a remarkable sword.

“Wha...?” He gasped.

“Bandersnatch squad. Please do not interfere for the time being. I will see for myself exactly how powerful the famed Princess is.”

She unsheathed the sword on her back and materialized a blade of light. And then she crooked the fingers of her left hand in invitation.

“You think you can take me?!” Tohka shouted and raced toward Ellen. She yanked Sandalphon up into the air and brought it down on Ellen’s head faster than the eye could see.

But Ellen easily stopped it with her sword one-handedly. “Oh my. Is that it?”

“Ngh!” Tohka groaned and swung Sandalphon again and again.

But Ellen defended against each and every blow. Her equipment wasn’t even scratched.

“Hyaaaah!”

“...” Stopping the stream of attacks, Ellen let out a short sigh. “Is this all you have, Princess?”

“Wh-what did you say?!”

“I even went to the trouble of equipping Pendragon. But it seems there was no need. I expected more. Let’s finish this then.” Ellen readied her massive laser blade and brought it down on Tohka.

“Ngh—” Tohka raised Sandalphon to intercept the blow.

““Huh?””

Shido and Tohka cried out in shock at the same time.

The moment it caught Ellen’s sword, Sandalphon shattered into pieces.

“What...is...?” Tohka groaned before Ellen’s attack sent her small body flying backward. “Ngaaah!”

She bounced several times before coming to a stop facedown against the ground. A heartbeat later, the shattered, rebounding pieces of Sandalphon turned into particles of light and melted into the air.

“T-Tohka!” Shido cried and started to run to her side. But two Bandersnatches appeared in front of him and blocked his movement. The other Bandersnatches clustered around Tohka, prone on the ground.

“Killjoy. Please render her unconscious and carry her to *Arbatel*,” Ellen ordered, snapping her fingers, and the armor wrapped around her body vanished in an instant. She turned her face away and crossed her arms as though she had lost interest even in Tohka.

But Shido’s predicament was unchanged. Two Bandersnatches grabbed Tohka’s arms where she lay motionless and lifted her up. As she slumped forward, another machine stepped in front of her and reached for her face with its talons.

“Ngh... Aaaaah!” Tohka writhed in anguish.

“Tohka! What are you doing to her?! Dammit! Get away from her!” Shido shouted, but the two dolls standing in front of him didn’t move.

A cross between a scream and a groan left Tohka’s throat.

“Tohka!” he shrieked.

His brain was overwhelmed with helplessness and despair. In the end, there was nothing he could do.

He couldn’t stop Kaguya and Yuzuru. He couldn’t save Tohka.

The sole power he had, the power to seal, was useless in a situation like this.

And the only other abilities he had were the healing power he borrowed from Kotori and the Spirit protection he gained from Tohka.

If he just had one more. If he only had the power to cut down these dolls and get to Tohka's side.

For some reason, Kurumi's face popped into his head, the face of the evilest Spirit, the murderer.

He remembered the unbearable powerlessness he'd felt facing her on the roof. And all he was left with was despair that he hadn't been able to save Kurumi.

He never wanted to feel that way again.

Shido heard a sound like something bursting inside his head.

He didn't care if it was just once in his entire life. If it was just this one time. If he had the power to save Tohka right now...

"Tohkaaaaaaaaaa!" He raised his right hand.

And then...

"Huh...?" he said, stunned.

When he brought his hand back down, the upper halves of the Bandersnatches blocking his way vanished. The head of another Bandersnatch—the head of the machine gripping Tohka's arm—slid off at an angle.

Tohka slumped down onto the ground, coughing.

"What...the...?" He looked down at his own right hand as if he was seeing something impossible.

A dazzling sword emitting its own *light*.



"Set temporary direction for Protect Territory range, coordinates one-three-two by five-oh by three-nine. Range, two fifty-five point two, four, six."

"R-roger. Protect Territory range setting, coordinates one-three-two by five-oh by three-nine. Range, two fifty-five point two, four, six," Deep Love, Minowa repeated back Kannazuki's order and tapped at his console.

The Territory around *Fraxinus* changed in nature and contracted in the direction and range specified by Kannazuki to form an invisible wall.

A half second later, a magic projectile from the enemy ship slammed into that exact location. While the monitor displaying the exterior of the ship whited out in a dazzling light, the bridge rocked slightly.

““...”” The crew of *Fraxinus* gasped as one.

Just as the name indicated, the objective of the Protect Territory was to defend the interior area from attack. As a general rule, the wider the area of effect, the weaker the Territory itself. Its strength increased dramatically if it was contracted until it just barely covered the surface of the target within.

But the orders Kannazuki had just given went beyond that. He had contracted the Territory into a wall on a single fixed location.

Naturally, doing so gave the Territory near limitless strength. And the the crew had just witnessed the results with their own eyes.

But this method of use was a risky double-edged sword. The reason for this was simple. When the Territory was deployed over a limited range, the rest of the ship was completely defenseless.

“Next, same directionality, Protect Territory range specification, five-oh point six-nine.”

“F-five-oh point six-nine?!”

“Please hurry. We *could* die, you know... Oh, but there is that, isn’t there? I do understand the desire to experience just once a pain as great as death—”

“Protect Territory specification, range five-oh point six-nine!”

In the middle of Kannazuki’s speech, the Territory was deployed at the specified coordinates. And again, a powerful magic bullet was launched at this small area the Territory covered.

The incoming round was strong enough that the ship would have been horrendously damaged if they had left the Territory at the previous settings. Somehow, almost as if he’d known where the enemy would strike, Kannazuki had specified the exact point where their defenses should be deployed.

And not once or twice, either.

After *Fraxinus* had taken the first hit, twelve magic bullets had been fired against them. And Kyouhei Kannazuki had defended against every single one.

True, there was just the one enemy ship. The direction of attack could be roughly estimated. On paper, it wasn't impossible. However...

"Okay, I've more or less grasped the rhythm. The truth is, I'd like them to go harder—I mean, attack, but we mustn't damage Commander Itsuka's beautiful world tree any further."

Kannazuki threw his hands up as if to get everyone's attention and glared at the enemy ship displayed on the main monitor.

"Ready the convergent magic power cannon Mistilteinn."

"Why aren't our attacks having any effect?!" Paddington roared and slammed a fist down on the armrest of the captain's chair.

They had launched any number of magic missiles, and yet *Fraxinus* stayed in the sky. The ship was not striking their attacks down or taking evasive action, either. It merely waited in position, accurately defending against the bullets.

Almost as if sneering at *Arbatel*.

"I-it appears they are deploying a Protect Territory at the estimated impact location an instant before the round actually arrives!"

"Ridiculous! As if anyone could do that!"

"B-but—," the crew member started when an alarm began to sound on the bridge. "Heat source detected! Magic is converging in the main armaments at the prow of the enemy ship!"

"Ngh." Paddington gritted his teeth. "Starboard one-oh-four! Divert all generated magic to Protect Territory!"

"Roger. Starboard one-oh-four."

The massive *Arbatel* shifted course.

In the next instant, a flash came from the prow of the enemy ship, and an incredible current of magic jetted forward.

This pierced the Territory of *Arbatel* on its new course, grazed the ship itself, and slipped past them, cutting through the clouds and melting into the air in the distance. A powerful tremor rocked the bridge.

“Ngh! Damn you! Damn you, damn you, damn you!” Paddington shouted and issued new orders. “All Ashcroft-beta up to number fifty in parallel world drive! Contract Territory to three meters from the ship’s surface and then hard to port! Full speed ahead! Eliminate the enemy ship’s Territory!”

“R-roger...!”





“Aah, aah. Right about now, Origami should be vacationing on a tropical island. I’m so jealous,” Milly drawled, fanning herself with a lightweight crystal display tablet in the hangar in one corner of the SDF Tengu Garrison.

“Don’t just flap your mouth. Get those hands moving.” Ryouko yanked on the goggles Milly had pushed up onto her forehead and let go. They snapped back into Milly’s forehead, and she fell over backward.

“Owww! Wh-what are you doing?!”

“Come on, this one’s next.” Ryouko indicated the combat Realizer in her hand, the laser knuckle Nutcracker. A cable stretched out toward Milly from the metal glove designed to cover the fist and lower arm. “I need to use this later, so get a move on.”

This equipment was specialized for close-range combat and allowed the user to cloak a fist in magic generated by a Realizer. It had an extremely short range, however, and only a few specialized soldiers on the squad used one. Ryouko was about the only one who happily used it on a regular basis.

“Really? It’s violence at every turn with you, Ryouko. You should take better care of your mechanic’s face!” Milly complained as she connected the cable to her tablet, tapped the screen, and began to fine-tune the equipment.

“What are you talking about? I’m already being unbelievably nice. You should’ve seen the captain when I joined the AST. Now he was wild. Gives me chills just thinking about it,” Ryouko said, her face paling as though she really was remembering something terrifying.

“Wild?” Milly glanced up doubtfully as she poked away at her tablet. “Was he really that bad?”

“Yeah.” Ryouko nodded, frowning. “So let’s say you were backtalking like you were now.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“The captain would come over without a word and...put a hand on your shoulder. And that was it, you were out. You’d have to spend the whole day in

whatever embarrassing costume of his choice. Naturally, when we were in training, you were forced to wear it over your wiring suit.”

“Whoa...” Milly’s eyebrows shot up on her forehead. Her hand slipped, and the numbers got knocked off. She hurried to correct the error she’d caused. “So it was costume play?”

“Yes.” Ryouko nodded. “And that was just the beginning. The second time, a penalty would be added where you had to step on the captain while cosplaying.”

“What? You mean the captain didn’t step on you?”

“No. The team member being penalized had to step on the captain.”

Milly’s cheeks twitched, and sweat beaded on her forehead. “Why, though?”

“No idea.” Ryouko shrugged. “Anyway, it creeped us all the hell out, so we always followed the rules.”

“Um, so then, what if you got a third warning?”

“Do you really want to know?”

Sensing something unnatural in Ryouko’s expression, Milly shook her head. “H-he sounds like a very particular captain, huh?”

“...I guess he was. When you pass all that through the filter of the beautiful Japanese language, you’re just barely left with the possibility of such a euphemistic description.”

“Uh. Uh-huh.” Milly smiled at Ryouko’s uncharacteristically dark tone.

“Well,” Ryouko continued. “He was a next-level pervert, but...his skills were the real deal. No joke, the way he could handle a Realizer was head and shoulders above everyone else. He was without a doubt the ace of our team.”

“W-wow, really?” Milly said. “Um, so then, where is he now? Someone that strong, the brass would want to put him on the front lines.”

“That’s...” Ryouko frowned, troubled. “I don’t really know. One day, he said, ‘I must find a suitable master to serve! Aah, please forgive me, comrades in arms! Please don’t stop me, brethren! Farewell, my average sworn friends!’ And then

he disappeared somewhere. At any rate, I guess they kept him on the books with the faint hope that he might come back, but...”

She shrugged.

“I do wonder what he’s up to.”



“They evaded Mistilteinn!”

“Oh dear, did we miss then? Mm, I’m not used to being on the side dishing it out,” Kannazuki joked, and the crew offered lifeless smiles.

“The enemy ship is coming this way!”

“I see. Are they coming to eliminate our Territory directly?”

In a fight between two ships equipped with Realizers, the logical end was that one of them would rip away the other’s Territory and conclude the battle.

Kannazuki hummed and then said, “Parallel operation for all basic Realizers. Please divert the generated magic to the Territory. Simultaneous with Territory contraction. Please narrow it down to two meters from the ship surface.”

“Roger. AR-008 numbers one through ten, commencing parallel operation.”

“Oh,” Kannazuki said. “And the control Territory, too. Leave one base and please divert the remaining magic.”

“Rog—uh, what?” The crew that had been faithfully repeating Kannazuki’s words hesitated.

That wasn’t very surprising, really.

Fraxinus’s Realizers could be broadly split into two categories. Basic Realizers generated the magic for the Territory and the weapons, and control Realizers that regulated them.

Given that the control Realizers were also Realizers, it was possible to use them to generate magic, although this was much more inefficient than with the basic Realizers. And perhaps this was their only option to resist the enemy ship closing in on them with its vast magic reserves.

But releasing the majority of the control Realizers was basically the same as

stripping out the computers and CPUs. While a vast amount of magic might have been generated, there was the risk of not being able to channel it into the Territory properly.

Kannazuki nodded as if he understood his crew's anxiety all too well. He pulled what looked like a black headset out from behind the captain's seat and set it on his head.

"It's all right. We have this in place of the control Realizers if need be," he said, pointing at himself.

"What...?"

"I'll explain later. If you don't want *Fraxinus* knocked out of the sky, please follow my orders."

"Ngh! Roger! Control Realizers two through eight, shift to magic generation!" The crew member entered the command into the console, and the Territory enveloping *Fraxinus* started to disappear but was soon restored.

"I-impossible..."

"Commander, what on earth did you do?"

"'What'?" Kannazuki arched an eyebrow. "The basic principle is no different from the AST wiring suit. They control the magic generated by the Realizer with their own brain waves, yes?"

"Control... We're talking about seven control Realizers made for an airship, though?!"

"We can discuss it later. Incoming."

An alarm began to blare on the bridge.

"The enemy ship has increased Territory output!"

"Hmm," Paddington said. "Are they going to fire on our *Arbatel* then?"

"We've made contact with the Territory! Brace for collision!" a crew member shouted as the bridge shuddered and shook.

"Ngh! Ranged Territory deployment!" Paddington yelled. "Concentrate on the contact surface with the enemy ship! We'll crush it in one go!"

“Roger! Ranged Territory deployed!”

A crew member swiped across a console, and the Territory deployed around *Arbatel* contracted in the direction of the enemy ship. There was no sign of movement on the enemy’s part.

Victory! Paddington clenched his hands into fists. The Territory output at the time of contact was equivalent to the size of the impact. They’d contracted their Territory first, making it that much stronger. The enemy could contract their Territory now, but it was too late. The poor Ratatoskr ship would be crushed by *Arbatel*’s—

“...?!” Paddington’s eyes flew open in surprise at the roar of an explosion from the rear of the ship.

For an instant, he thought it was an enemy attack, but that was impossible. The explosion had come from the exact opposite side of the enemy ship.

“Report!” he barked.

“Breach starboard side! Damage due to an external impact has been confirmed!”

“External impact?! An enemy attack?!”

“I—I don’t know! Cause is unknown!” the crew member shrieked.

Another crew member screamed. “Ngh! Captain, this is bad! Section B-2 is on fire, and there’s damage to the control room tasked with long-distance Bandersnatch operation!”

“What?! Put that fire out now!” Paddington clenched his teeth as he gave the order.

“Wh-what was...?” Hinako muttered on the bridge of *Fraxinus* after the shaking stopped, stunned as she watched the enemy ship retreat.

She had panicked at Kannazuki’s apparent lack of strategy after the enemy contracted and strengthened their Territory, when flames suddenly shot up from the enemy ship, and it pulled away from *Fraxinus*.

Not to mention the fact that the enemy ship had been damaged in an entirely different place from where it was in contact with *Fraxinus*. Just who had joined

in the attack?

Hinako wasn't the only one with questions. The majority of the crew was at a loss for words as they all stared in Kannazuki's direction.

The man in question shrugged and tapped the small monitor in front of him. As if to say, "Eyes on your stations."

When the crew obediently looked at their own monitors, their eyes grew round as saucers.

They could see the enemy ship turning, flames shooting out of it, and...a silhouette like a small leaf with Invisible deployed.

"Is that...Yggdrafolium?"

The independent unit launched as a relay station for communication with Arubi right before the enemy ship appeared.

At once, they all understood. A shiver ran up their spines.

Yggdrafolium was equipped with its own small Realizers. They allowed remote operation from *Fraxinus*, as well as the generation of a Territory. But that deployed Territory was supposed to be for communication purposes only.

Kannazuki had remotely operated this device and used it like a land mine.

However, it was hard to immediately believe that this kind of fine remote control was possible, even with the assistance of seven control Realizers.

"Well, what shall we say?" Kannazuki began, perhaps reading his crew's minds. "It's sad, perhaps. However high level our technology, a human being still can't re-create a single human brain." He shrugged casually.

He was apparently deaf to the thought next broadcast by the entire crew: *But there aren't any human brains that can do something like this...*



"Wh... This is... Sandalphon?" Shido said, staring at the sword that had appeared in his own right hand.

The broad, shining blade. The hilt with its precision detailing.

Yes. This was without a doubt Tohka's "miracle made manifest," the Angel

Sandalphon.

“Shi...do? H-how can you have Sandalphon?” Tohka was also looking at Shido in surprise.

And of course she was. Despite being shattered by Ellen, Sandalphon was now sitting in Shido’s hand.

Even as Shido was surprised by this turn of events, a part of him had already calmly accepted it as fact.

After all, his healing ability was not his by nature, but rather something that manifested because he had sealed Kotori’s power after she became a Spirit. So maybe this structure could also be adapted to the other Spirits whose power Shido had sealed inside himself. There was a nonzero possibility that Shido might be able to wield the powers of those other Spirits.

This theory was, in fact, proven most powerfully by what was happening right now. By the manifestation of the Angel.

“An Angel? And the same one as Princess? Impossible. I smashed it to pieces just now. And more importantly, why would you—?” In a complete turnaround from her previous total lack of interest in him, Ellen stared at Shido with a hint of curiosity. “Shido...Itsuka, was it? What on earth are you?”

“Human... More or less.”

“...” Ellen frowned and raised a hand.

The surrounding Bandersnatches dropped down into a defensive posture.

“I’ve changed my mind. Shido Itsuka. You will also be coming along. I would not recommend resisting.”

“Ngh...” Shido scowled, clutching the weapon.

It was true that he had essentially shut down two Bandersnatches. But there were still eight of them left, and they were all on the defensive. Plus, the mysterious wizard behind them had easily defeated Tohka in limited Spirit mode. He could only too easily imagine how difficult it would be to flee with Tohka in this situation.

“Bandersnatch squad. Please capture him. If it appears that he is going to

resist, you may break limbs,” Ellen said and brought down her hand in Shido’s direction.

The Bandersnatches charged at Shido.

“Ngh! You...!” He swung Sandalphon, but he couldn’t activate the slicing attack again. The blade merely carved out an arc in the darkness, its light dull.

Naturally, there was no way a blow like this would hit the Bandersnatches. Easily evading his attack, they reached out for his right hand and Sandalphon.

An instant later...

“Huh...?”

He had no sooner heard a sudden crackling than the mechanical dolls surrounding Shido and Tohka started writhing in place, sparks shooting from their heads.

“What the...?” He frowned. The mechanical dolls had been functioning until that very moment, and now they began behaving erratically, like electronic toys whose batteries had just run dry.

Ellen stared at the sword gripped in Shido’s hand and scowled, baffled. And then she put a hand to her ear and began to speak.

“The unit reactions are confused. Did something happen?” She listened for a moment and then groaned. “The control room was bombed? How can that be? ...A battle with an airship? I don’t recall authoriz—”

“...!” Shido couldn’t let this chance pass them by. He grabbed Tohka’s hand and started running as fast as he could.

“Wh-what’s going on?” Tohka cried.

“Don’t know! But this is our chance!” he said and raced toward the forest, away from the dolls.

“We can’t let them get away,” Ellen said behind them. “Please give chase.”

Several Bandersnatches turned their heads as if to go after Shido and Tohka. But their limbs moved at random like broken marionettes, flailing wildly until they fell on their faces.

“Ngh... What are you doing?!” Ellen clicked her tongue impatiently and started after Shido and Tohka herself.

But...

“Hangh?!” Her foot was caught in a hole in the ground, and she slammed into the ground. “Wh-why is there a hole...?! No! The super-fast hole-digging technique—”

A Bandersnatch toppled forward on top of her.

“Huh? Wh-what?!”

Thinking she was in the clear after taking Tohka down and releasing her CR unit had apparently brought catastrophe. Ellen was crushed beneath the heavy mechanical doll.

“Th-this is ridiculous... I—I am the most...powerful wiza—mph!” she cried out, and then stopped moving.

She could have regained consciousness at any moment. The Bandersnatches could have recovered their functionality. Shido stopped looking back, turned his face forward, and ran in the roaring wind.

“...! That’s—”

“Mm!”

Shido and Tohka cried out together as they raced forward, side by side.

In the sky above the forest, trees flattened in a circle that radiated outward, they could see Kaguya and Yuzuru engaged in combat.

“Kaguya! Yuzuru!”

They really needed to get away from Ellen and her squad as fast as they could, but Shido came to an immediate halt.

If he didn’t stop them here and now, they would almost certainly decide this themselves. And deciding this meant that one of them would be annihilated.

Even if they didn’t reach that decision tonight, the result would be the same thing if they were Lost to the parallel world.

To save both of them, Shido had to seal their Spirit power here and now.

“Kaguya! Yuzuru! You have to stop! There might be a way for both of you to live!” he shouted, but it didn’t look like they could hear him. He wasn’t that far away, but the swirling wall of wind around them shut out all sound.

“Ngh! What am I going to...?” he said, and then his eyes flew open and he looked down at his own hand.

He was still holding Tohka’s Angel Sandalphon.

With one blow of this Bandersnatch-slaughtering Angel, he might be able to cut through the storm wall around Kaguya and Yuzuru.

Naturally, he didn’t think that would be enough to stop them—but it just might hold their attention for a moment and make them listen to what he had to say.

It was a slim chance. But he was out of options.

“Sorry, Tohka. You need to get back a bit!”

“Mm...? M-mm.” Tohka nodded unquestioningly and took several steps away from Shido.

After checking this in the corner of his eye, he readied Sandalphon in both hands and made the blade flash as if to cut through the wind fortress enveloping Kaguya and Yuzuru.

“Hyaaaah!”

But Sandalphon did not shoot the light it had shown him the first time.

“Ngh...”

He kept trying, but the result stayed the same. Sandalphon only cut the air within range of its blade and refused to show him the absolute power it had when Tohka wielded it.

“I can’t...!” He gritted his teeth and readjusted his grip on the hilt of the sword.

It wasn’t over yet. He looked over at the blade’s true owner.

“Tohka! Please! Use Sandalphon to stop them!”

“What?” Tohka shouted. But then she nodded, indicating that she was all in,

maybe because she saw how Kaguya and Yuzuru were clashing furiously, or because she guessed that things were dire from the look Shido gave her.

“Sorry. I need you to do this!” He held the hilt of Sandalphon out toward her.

“Mm. I got it.” She nodded again and took Sandalphon in hand.

However...

“...!” She gasped, and a crease rose up on her brow.

“Tohka...?”

“It’s no use. I can’t use Sandalphon like this.”

“Huh?” Shido was visibly confused.

Tohka stared straight into his eyes. “Sandalphon’s no ordinary sword. It’s an Angel that manifests due to the wish of someone with Spirit power. Maybe if I had my full Spirit powers, but Sandalphon was summoned because of your wish, meaning I can’t use it.”

“But that’s—then...” Shido lifted his face, despair in his heart.

In the sky above, the two Spirits were still mercilessly going at each other, no holds barred, in their battle to *let the other live*.

Praising their opponent all the while. Thoughts of their opponent filling each and every action. Conveying their love with every blow.

The twisted battle between the extremely awkward fighters who loved each other more than anything else continued unabated.

Both of them fought as hard as they could to make sure only they would be the one to die.

“... Like I’d let that happen!” Shido shouted, then he grabbed Sandalphon’s hilt a little more tightly and swung the blade one more time.

Naturally, he got the exact same result. But he was out of options. He kept swinging.

“Dammit! God dammit! This has to work! If this keeps up, they’ll...”

If Shido used his sealing ability, he could lock away both of their Spirit powers.

And then maybe, just maybe, the two girls would not return to being the single Yamai, but be able to stay the way they were now.

He didn't have to step into the center of that storm. Just a single blow. If he could rip through the wind and force them to turn their attention on him!

Tohka placed a hand on his shoulder.

"...! Tohka?" He turned his face away from the sky toward Tohka and swallowed hard.

Her hand on his shoulder was not a gentle one to comfort him in his failure, but strong as if rebuking him fiercely.

"I'm jealous—seeing you fighting so hard."

"Tohka...?" Shido said, baffled.

Tohka flashed him an almost wistful smile. "I started to say this before, but I think the only way is for everyone to talk it out actually. If they know that you have a way to let them both live, Kaguya and Yuzuru will put away their swords."

Her words were so simple, but full of truth.

"But how can I—?"

"I *told* you. Sandalphon was summoned because of your wish, Shido. So you're the only one who can make it come true."

"...! Me?"

Tohka bobbed her head up and down and guided Shido's hands around the hilt of the sword. Then she slipped behind him and wrapped her arms around his body so that they were gripping Sandalphon together.

But...their physiques were really different.

"Mmm," Tohka grumbled and slid under Shido's arms to stand in front of him. With him behind her, arms around her like a helping hands comedy routine, she slipped her hands over his on the hilt of Sandalphon.

"Tohka..."

"Calm your mind. And remember. What do you want to do? What are you

wishing for right now? Put everything else out of your mind. Imagine that wish in your heart and swing the sword. The Angel will respond.”

“...” Shido swallowed hard, lowered his eyes, and let out a tiny breath.

As instructed, he took several breaths to calm his mind.

Setting aside the wail of the wind beating on his eardrums, the gale whipping his hair up, and even the warmth of Tohka against his hands and chest, he pictured one thing in his heart.

Kaguya and Yuzuru. The Spirit split into two by chance or by necessity.

Beings forced to reckon with the destiny that one of them would disappear from the moment they were born. But knowing what fate awaited them, they each fought with all their might to let their beloved other half live.

Shido clenched his teeth.

“Like I’d ever let that happen!”

He couldn’t let either of these two kind girls disappear.

So before they settled this fight, a profane and absolute blow would crush their sacred battle!

“...!!” Shido stared in shock. Sandalphon’s blade was shining so powerfully, its earlier glow paled in comparison.

When he readjusted his grip on the hilt, Tohka tightened hers along with him, and her head dropped forward.

Shido lifted his face once more and looked up at the two awkward idiots brawling in the sky.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

With a scream of a battle cry, he brought Sandalphon toward them.

Light shot out from the blade and reached upward.

It easily cut through the bastion of wind blowing high above and plunged through the air, passing between Kaguya and Yuzuru. The roiling clouds were split in two, and the hidden moon showed its face.

The squalling storm stopped as if it had never been, and he heard two baffled voices.

“Wha—?”

“Unease. What is...?”

Facing each other with lance and pendulum, Kaguya’s and Yuzuru’s eyes grew wide, and as if searching for the origin of this slicing attack, they turned those eyes downward.

When they saw Shido there, they frowned.

“Shido...?! Was that you just now?”

“Shock. Impossible. That was amazing Spirit power.”

Shido plunged Sandalphon into the ground like a staff, and half riding on Tohka’s back, he shouted, “Kaguya! Yuzuru!”

One blow. Just a single blow, and yet his whole body screamed with pain. But he couldn’t let this chance to make them hear him slip away. He screamed so loudly, his throat threatened to split open.

“Please... Stop fighting!”

Kaguya and Yuzuru scowled, displeased.

“Were you not listening? Yuzuru and I are made so that one of us has to incorporate the other.”

“Agreement. That is exactly right. Please do not get in the way. I am in the middle of teaching this blockhead just how excellent a Spirit Kaguya is.”

“Y-you’re still saying that?! I told you there’s no point in me surviving! Why don’t you get it?! Yuzuru! You’re the one who should live!”

“Negative. I do not think so. Kaguya is the one who should live.”

“You just—!”

“Exasperation. Kaguya is the one—”

“I—!”

If he let them keep this up, the battle he’d worked so hard to interrupt

threatened to begin once more. He raised his voice again. “I have no intention of stepping down as the judge of your final battle! I will choose! Who is the Spirit suited to be the true Yamai?! Who should live on?!”

““...!””

The eyes of both Kaguya and Yuzuru flew open, and they glared at Shido. But neither of them said anything. Apparently, they were willing to at least listen to what he had to say.

But he understood only too well what those glares turned on him meant. He could feel the pressure from both girls practically sparking off his skin.

Basically, they were thinking: Fine, he can choose. But if he tried to choose her, she would run him through the heart before he was finished even speaking her name.

And they were the wind Spirits Berserk. They did, in fact, have the power to make that happen.

Shido swallowed nervously and opened his mouth.

“I choose...*both of you!*”

His voice echoed in the silent, still woods.

Kaguya and Yuzuru stared at him for a few seconds before sighing in near unison.

“...What? Are you for real?”

“Scorn. That is the response of a child. An indecisive man with no powers is pathetic.”

They both sounded exasperated.

But Shido was for real. He was dead serious.

“I don’t have much of a choice! You each have so many good qualities that are different from each other, there’s no way to choose!”

“Wha...?” Kaguya’s face turned red.

“...” Yuzuru rolled her eyes.

“Each of us?! Don’t talk like you know us! What do you even—?!”

“I know!” he cried. “At the very least, there’s one thing I learned before you two!”

“...Question. What is that?”

Shido clenched his hands into fists and pushed the words out of a tight throat. “I know that Kaguya cares so much more for Yuzuru than Yuzuru cares for herself, and Yuzuru believes Kaguya is so much more precious than Kaguya would ever dare to think.”

“...! What?”

“...”

The pair fell silent, at a loss for words.

Shido willed himself to stay on his feet, although his exhausted and aching body threatened to collapse at any second, and continued, wringing the words out of the very core of his being.

“You two!! Have the right to select what comes next! So choose!

“One! Yuzuru incorporates Kaguya and becomes the true Yamai!

“Two! Kaguya incorporates Yuzuru and becomes the true Yamai!”

The Spirits immediately opened their mouths, their expressions indicating their confidence in their responses.

“That’s obvious. One!”

“Reply. There is no need to even question this. Two!”

But Shido ignored them and kept going.

“Or three! You lose your Spirit powers, and you *both* survive!”

““...?!”” Kaguya and Yuzuru were momentarily stunned into silence.

“Huh?” Kaguya said finally. “What did you say?”

“Demand,” Yuzuru insisted. “What was that just now?”

Shido cleared his throat loudly. Tohka turned a concerned face toward him. But he couldn’t stop talking now. Swallowing to wet his throat, he managed to

say something.

“Sorry. I’ve only been allowed to choose from a set of three options for a long time now... I can’t work with just two.”

“What...are you talking about? There’s no way that’s even possible.”

“Dubious. That’s right. I have never heard of such a method.”

Kaguya and Yuzuru turned doubtful eyes on him. He had expected that much. Telling them to believe his claim was an exercise in futility.

However...

“Please!” he shouted. “You have to trust me! Just this once! Give me the chance to let both of you live! If that fails, you can do whatever you want! I don’t care! You can even kill me! So...!”

“...What? You’re just a human. You can’t—”

“Have you forgotten who sliced through your precious wind just now?”

“Ngh!”

“Consideration...”

Kaguya and Yuzuru glanced at each other. They looked less like they were trying to figure out whether or not what Shido was saying was true and more like they were simply baffled by this sudden development.

“So just stop! There’s no need for you to fight! There’s no need for...one of you to disa—”

A wave of dizziness washed over him, and he crumpled to the ground. Sandalphon fell over, turned into particles of light, and melted into the air.

“Shido!” Tohka cried and shook him by the shoulders.

But answering her was too much for him. He was technically still conscious, but all he could do was wheeze; he couldn’t speak at all. It seemed that his human body had reached its limit at last.

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

In the sky above, Kaguya and Yuzuru stared at each other.

“...That’s what he said,” Kaguya remarked quietly. “What d’you think, Yuzuru?”

“Distrust.” Yuzuru shook her head. “It’s impossible. Even if Shido did strike that blow now, I have never heard of power being taken from a Spirit.”

“Right?! Same here.”

“...! ...!” His vision blurred, Shido worked his lungs to try and speak somehow. But no matter how much air he pushed out, his breaths refused to become sound.

It was no use. He couldn’t convince them. And his grip on consciousness was slipping.

Stop. Please stop. I really do have the power to save you. If you reach out your hands, I can take them.

His unvoiced thoughts did not reach the sky above.

Kaguya and Yuzuru continued as they looked into each other’s eyes.

“Honestly. Shido is the real problem. Getting in our way twice now.”

“Agreement. It is exasperating. Just when I was about to defeat you.”

“What are you talking about? I was just about to launch a special attack.”

“Sneer. Was it Sturm Lanze—asterisk laugh asterisk?”

“Sh-shut up! Say that again, and I’m gonna get angry for real.”

“Counterattack. Go ahead. Please do as you wish. Either way, the winner will be Yuzuru. I will make sure that you live.”

“Not on my watch. I’ll be winning this thing. You have to live on.”

“Objection. No, you do.”

Kaguya readied her lance, Yuzuru her pendulum. The wind began to blow around them once more.

However...

“Hey, Yuzuru?”

“Response. What is it?”

“Just spitballing here. Talking if. Talking about possibilities. What if what Shido’s saying is true?”

“Petition. Would you allow me time to consider?”

“I’ll allow it. Thirty seconds.”

“...”

“Okay, time’s up. So?”

“Response... I think that would be very wonderful.”

“...Hmph. You’re surprisingly romantic.”

“Indignation. So then what about you?”

“...Real coincidence. Same here.”

“Question. If both of us could live, what would you want to do, Kaguya?”

“Me? Right... Oh! I might want to have some of that *kinako* bread Tohka was talking about. Apparently, it’s the most delicious thing in the world.”

“Agreement. It does sound good.”

“What about you?”

“Answer. I’d like to try going to school.”

“Ohhh. Nice. Ha-ha-ha! I just know all the boys at school would be in love with you.”

“Negative. I don’t think that would happen.”

“Huh? Why not?”

“Response. It’s just, you’d be with me, too. I’m sure you would be more popular, Kaguya.”

“Ha. Ha... I’d be with you?”

“Affirmative. After all, we are speaking hypothetically. I don’t recall there being any limits placed on that.”

“Ohhh... Is that it? Okay, so then once class is over, how about we go walk

around in town after school?”

“Agreement. That would be wonderful. I’d like to go to a café.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. But we’d split the bill, got it?”

“Negative. That is unfair. You eat more, Kaguya.”

“N-not that much more.”

“Doubt. Oh, really?”

“...”

“...”

There was silence between them for a while.

In the howling of the wind, the first one to speak again was Kaguya.

“...Hey, Yuzuru?”

“Response. What is it?”

“Sorry. I lied... I.” Large tears spilled from Kaguya’s eyes. “I...don’t want...to die,” she sobbed. “I want to live... I want to be with you for a long time. I want to be together much, much longer.”

“Respo—” Now tears streamed down Yuzuru’s cheeks. “Me...too. I do not want to...disappear. I want to live with Kaguya.”

“Yuzuru...”

“Kaguya.”

Their eyes met, and their mouths moved at the same time.

““...””

But the voices from their throats did not reach the other.

The sound of an enormous engine roared far above Kaguya and Yuzuru in the sky, drowning them out.

“What...?”

“Attention. That is—”

Kaguya and Yuzuru looked up.

A massive black warship hung there, smoke spewing from its rear.

“Captain! It’s too dangerous to descend any farther! With Invisible deactivated, we risk being seen by the locals!” a crew member cried anxiously on the bridge of *Arbatel*.

“Quiet!” Paddington silenced them with a bark from the captain’s chair.

Seen by the locals? That was the point. And indeed, as soon as *Arbatel* started to drop altitude, the Ratatoskr airship stopped its pursuit.

In a stroke of good luck, the captain of that ship appeared to have the same mediocre brain power as his own crew. With anonymity as their top priority, they were about to let a wounded enemy escape before their eyes.

“Wait. Or perhaps not?” Paddington licked his lips.

If their objective was to keep their own ship hidden, there were still ways to attack without following *Arbatel*. They could fire a concentrated magic cannon or have more of that unknown explosive they’d used earlier.

But at this altitude, such an attack risked damage to the island.

That ship’s captain belonged to an eccentric organization that was trying to win over the Spirits through peaceful means of all things... Paddington had risked this gamble, and it seemed to be paying off.

But that wasn’t enough.

He’d lost several Bandersnatches, *Arbatel* was damaged, and they were fleeing an enemy. At the moment, Paddington’s loss was definitive.

To come out on top somehow now, he needed to do something more.

Paddington glared at the two girls displayed on the screen.

According to the intel he’d received from Ellen right before communications had been cut off, they were the Spirit Berserk.

“Is the fire in the control room out?! Deploy all remaining Bandersnatches! Secure Berserk and Princess at any cost!”

“B-but—”

“Just do it!” Paddington snarled.

A moment later, the crew member grimaced and entered the order into the console.

“What the heck is that?”

“Agreement. I wish they would read the room.”

Kaguya and Yuzuru spoke disapprovingly as they stared up at the enormous lump of steel that had appeared in the sky.

They had finally been about to reach a settlement with their other half, and this ship had interrupted that precious moment with almost purposeful timing.

And that wasn't the end of it.

A hatch built into the bottom of the ship had opened, releasing heavily armed dolls one after another.

Smooth, inorganic forms. They did have heads and limbs at least, but they looked less like humans and more like the villains or demons that often appeared in fairy tales.

The mechanical dolls spread the wings on their backs in midair and turned with surprising agility to fly up and surround Kaguya and Yuzuru.

In the blink of an eye, the dolls turned gun barrels equipped on their right hands and shot beams of light toward the two girls.

“Whoa?!”

“...!”

Kaguya and Yuzuru just barely managed to dodge the incoming attacks and turned to glare at the dolls. But their pursuers had quickly readied their weapons for a follow-up attack and were already firing again.

“Ngh! What is *with* these doll things?!”

Kaguya spun the tip of the lance to produce a small tornado and mow down one group of dolls.

“Attack. This is irritating.”

Yuzuru did something with her pendulum, and another group was blown away.

But the scattered dolls instantly reoriented themselves and came at them again, ignoring the law of gravity.

Kaguya and Yuzuru both furrowed their brows unhappily.

“Heh... Creepy.”

“Agreement. To be honest, I do not want to touch them.”

They knocked the dolls away once more and looked up at the sky.

The doll attack was apparently not over. More and more fell from the hatch of the massive airship and fluttered down toward them.

The two girls frowned in annoyance and opened their mouths at the exact same moment. They could cut down all the dolls they wanted, and it would never be enough.

“So, like, Yuzuru?”

“Suggestion. Kaguya.”

Their voices perfectly overlapped. They opened their eyes wide in surprise and looked at each other.

And then they laughed.

“You wanna do it?”

“Affirmative. I want to do it.”

They nodded at each other.

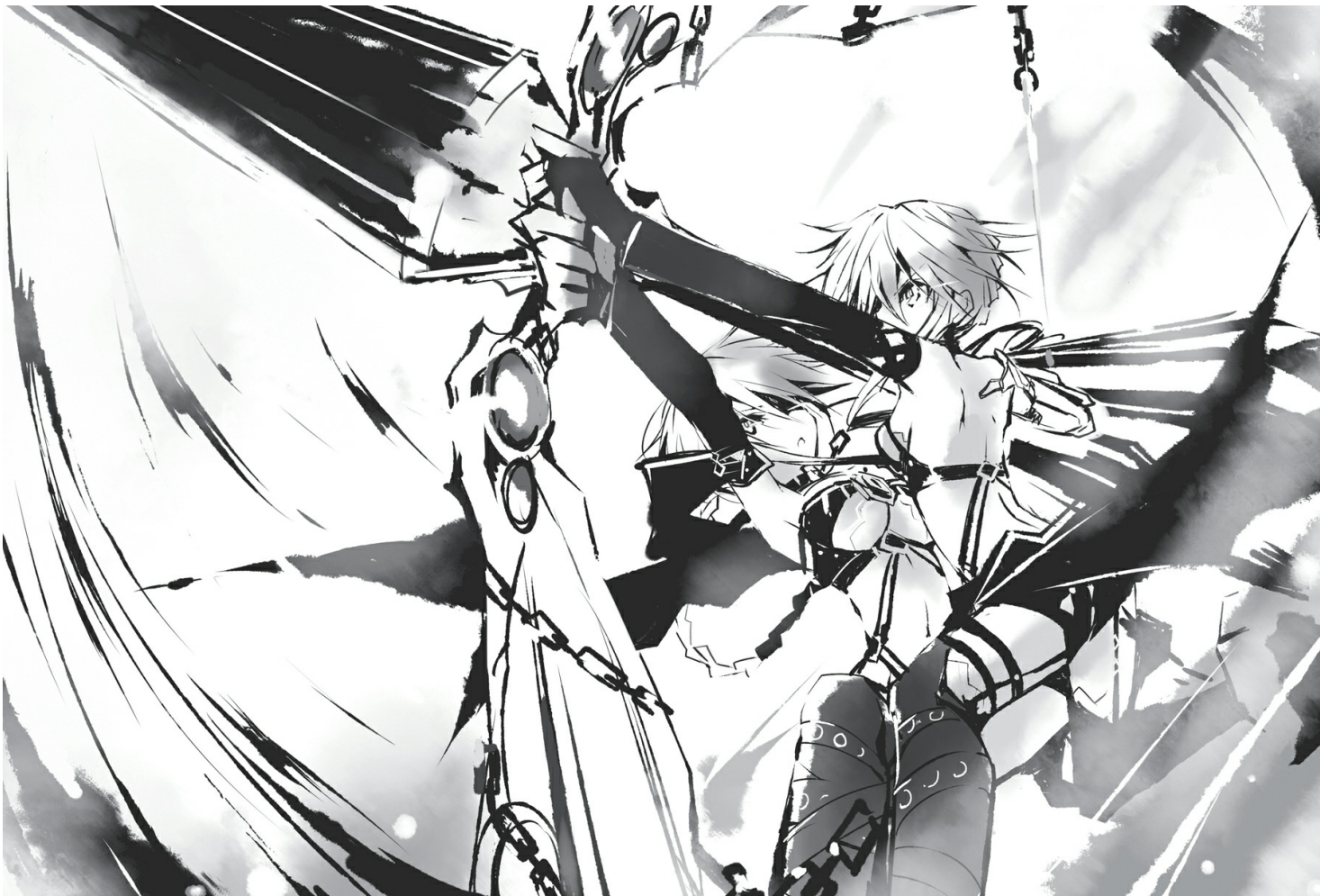
And then Kaguya put out her left hand and Yuzuru her right, and they laid them on top of each other. Their Astral Dresses and Angels shone brightly as the wing on Kaguya’s right shoulder and the wing on Yuzuru’s left came together, taking the shape of a bow.

Yuzuru’s pendulum became the string, connecting the tips of the wings while Kaguya’s lance became a nocked arrow.

Now, hands cloaked in the armor of their Astral Dress, Kaguya on the right and Yuzuru on the left pulled the string back together.

When they had pulled it back as far as it would go, they turned the bow

toward the airship in the sky.



““Raphael. El Kanaph!!””

They released the string together and launched this massive arrow high into the heavens.

A wind pressure orders of magnitude greater than anything they’d conjured before tore through the air.

Directly beneath the girls, Shido and Tohka were safe from the effects, but the turbulence left in the wake of this intense pressure hit the charging dolls, knocking them helplessly backward. The wind mowed down the few trees still left standing in the area, and the forest rippled, waves running through it.

Nothing in this world could stop the advance of this arrow cloaked in the blessing of the wind.

An absolute and peerless attack focused on a single point.

The most powerful arrow, launched for the first time by the two Yamais.

There was no way that the airship, a product of human engineering, had any hope of avoiding it.

Raphael’s arrow pierced the enormous ship, and the wind pressure cloaking it ripped the interior apart, causing a massive explosion that dyed the sky red.



“Ngh. Aah...” Groaning, Origami cracked open her eyes.

Her field of view showed not the sky of the island in the middle of a storm, but the ceiling of a room in the inn illuminated with a square lamp. She was suddenly overcome with the sensation that it had all been a dream, but no. She registered a dull pain in her side.

Scowling, she touched her chest and found that a compress and bandages had been applied. “What on earth...?”

“...Oh, you’re awake?”

She heard a sleepy voice from beside her head. The assistant homeroom teacher, Reine Murasame.

“Ms. Murasame? Where am I?” she asked.

“...My room. Sorry, I had to carry you inside. If the other students had found you, it would have been a whole thing.”

“That...doll—”

“...Oh. After you passed out, it suddenly stopped moving for some reason.”

“It did?” Origami said briefly and sat up, her body squealing in protest.

“...Best not to push yourself,” Reine told her. “You just rest for now.”

“Did you treat me?”

“...Mm-hmm. Sorry it’s a bit of a patchwork, though.”

“No... I’m grateful.”

“...I’m the one who should be thanking you. You saved me. Thanks.” Reine bowed her head.

Origami swallowed hard. “About that doll.”

“...I didn’t tell anyone. That way’s best, right?”

“...” Origami looked at Reine silently.

She felt as if this teacher, Ms. Murasame, was curiously calm for someone who had recently been assaulted by a mechanical doll-monster. On top of that, she had coolly assessed the situation, treated Origami’s injuries, and hadn’t told a single soul about anything that had happened.

And she was right. Origami didn’t want word of this mysterious doll to spread far. But she couldn’t help feeling somehow that this teacher was a little too competent.

...Almost as though she was aware of the existence of CR units.

But Origami cut off that line of thought because something more important had crossed her mind.

“Shido.”

“...Hmm?”

“Where’s Shido?”

“...Oh, he’s fine. He’s heading this way now.”

Origami started to let out a sigh of relief but then frowned. “How do you know that?”

“...” Reine looked everywhere but at Origami as she scratched her cheek, troubled. Finally, she opened her mouth. “...Gut feeling?”

“...” Origami crawled out of the futon. Something as unreliable as a “gut feeling” wasn’t a guarantee for Shido’s safety. She couldn’t relax just yet.

But the moment she got to her feet, a sharp pain ran across her abdomen, and she dropped to her knees. “Unh!”

“...I told you. You can’t push yourself. Come on. He’ll be back soon.”

“...Ngh.” On all fours, Origami punched the tatami-matted floor. This impact caused a minor flare of pain in her side, but she ignored it and punched the mat again.

Just one blow. A single blow that didn’t use weapons. This was the blow of a human being who wasn’t a Spirit, who wasn’t anything more than a regular person.

Now that her Realizer had been taken from her, Origami was just a human being, so human, it made her sad.

Too weak, too powerless. Her life had been spared by mere coincidence. If that doll hadn’t stopped functioning, she and Reine might have been killed. A fragile little girl who couldn’t even get Shido—her lover—out of a dangerous place. That was all Origami Tobiichi could claim to be in her current state.

She clenched her teeth and tasted a hint of blood.

“—ong.”

“...Hmm?” Reine cocked her head to one side.

But Origami wasn’t saying the words for Reine. She repeated them again, telling herself, “I want...to be strong. Strong enough to...not rely on anyone... and be able to protect...Shido...!”

“...” Reine lowered her eyes and draped a sweater over Origami’s shoulders.



"Arbatel. This is Adeptus One. Please respond. Arbatel," Ellen called, having regained consciousness somehow and crawled out from under the Bandersnatch, but all she heard through her earpiece was static.

"..." She clicked her tongue, and her eyebrows twisted up.

In all probability, *Arbatel* had been downed. There was little doubt about that, given how all the Bandersnatches had abruptly ceased functioning.

She considered the current situation. It would have been one thing if *Arbatel* had been completely destroyed so that not a trace of it remained and Paddington and the others were dead. But she couldn't allow the ship to fall into the hands of Ratatoskr— She jumped slightly. A sound had suddenly come through from her earpiece.

"Arbatel, is that you? Status re—"

But the person on the other end of the line was not whom she had expected. A familiar laugh echoed in her ear.

"Heh-heh... From the look of things, I'd say the mission was a failure. Quite unusual for you, hmm, Ellen?"

"Ike."

Yes. It was none other than Isaac Westcott.

"My sincerest apologies. I'm responsible for all of this." Naturally, she didn't believe this in her gut. It was the fault of that incompetent boob given a toy with too much power—and those demonic schoolgirls.

Westcott laughed again. *"So where's Princess?"*

"...My apologies. I failed to capture her."

"And was she a Spirit?"

"What? Y-yes. I was able to confirm that," Ellen said. "There is no mistake. Tohka Yatogami is the Spirit Princess."

"Heh-heh, well then, you've clarified that, hmm?" Westcott sounded quite satisfied. *"This mission has produced results even if only for the fact that we learned that. Good work. Head on home."*

“...”

“Is there a problem?”

“Not at all. I just have one final question.”

“Oh? And what’s that?”

Ellen parted her lips quietly. “Do you believe there exist human beings who are able to wield Spirit power?”



Shido staggered back to the inn, leaning on Tohka’s shoulder.

The forest was a shadow of its former self, and he had a clearer line of sight than when they’d first entered, so walking was a bit easier.

“I hope the inn’s still in one piece,” he muttered, staring at the dim path ahead.

He heard Kaguya and Yuzuru gasp from behind. Maybe.

They were almost at the inn when they came upon something curious.

“Hmm? That’s... It’s one of those Bandersnatch things, right?” he said.

It had apparently been thrown here by Kaguya and Yuzuru’s wind. Its head looked caved in. Maybe it had hit it when it fell from the sky.

“Keh-keh.” He heard Kaguya’s laughter from behind. “Our tornado is powerful indeed. Toying with a doll is easy.”

“Agreement. The wind of Yuzuru and Kaguya is the most powerful.”

The two bumped fists and smiled at each other. They were acting so chummy that it was almost impossible to even imagine how hostile their relationship had been.

“More importantly, Shido. You must soon seal our powers.”

“Agreement. Although there is still time, sooner is better.”

“Uh. Well. The thing is...” Shido glanced at Tohka. She stared back blankly, curiously. “I—I have to get some stuff ready. I’ll definitely do it tomorrow morning. Just hang on a bit longer.”

Shido stalled for time. There was no way he could do it in front of Tohka.

“Hmph... This is no lie, yes? Should you spew falsehoods to the children of the hurricane, not even your bones shall remain when we’re through with you.”

“Death. You will be in pieces.”

“I-I’m not lying.”

““ ...””

The two girls looked at him with suspecting eyes and then sighed.

“Keh-keh... Well and good. I shall believe you. Incidentally, Tohka?”

“Mm? What?”

“Appeal. Would you allow us to borrow Shido for a brief period?” Yuzuru said, as if completing Kaguya’s thought.

“I don’t really mind.” Tohka cocked her head curiously to one side. “But why?”

“D-doesn’t matter. It’s just for a bit. You may wait here,” Kaguya said and took Shido’s hand from Tohka’s shoulder.

The two Spirits carried him to the edge of the forest.

“Wh-what is it?” he asked.

“It’s fine. Just be quiet.”

“Agreement. Silence is golden.”

They were clearly brooking no objection, and Shido obediently shut his mouth. The girls stopped when they were out of Tohka’s line of sight.

“...Shido. Well, I don’t know how to put this. Thanks. For a bunch of stuff.”

“Gratitude. Thanks to you, I no longer need to fight Kaguya.”

“Oh, I mean...” He smiled, troubled. He was flabbergasted by their sudden meekness.

After signaling each other with their eyes, Kaguya and Yuzuru turned their gazes back on Shido.

“So, well, it’s nothing much, but think of it as a thank-you.”

“Petition. Please close your eyes.”

“Huh? Close my...” He frowned, but he obeyed their instruction.

And then...

“...?!”

From either side, something gentle pressed against the right and the left sides of his lips.

Yes. Kaguya and Yuzuru were kissing him at the same time.

“Wh—what are you—?” he stammered, flustered.

“I—I told you. A thank-you. The first kiss of two absolute beauties like me and Yuzuru, okay? I figured you’d be dancing with joy. So what’s with the freak-out?”

“Apology. Was this an inconvenience?”

Kaguya’s face turned red as she crossed her arms, while Yuzuru hung her head apologetically.

“Wha—?”

“Shock. What is this—?”

They cried out in confusion. And of course they did. The bondage gear and chains twined about their bodies had turned into particles of light and vanished.

“Wh-whoaaaaaa?!”

“Panic. This is pervy.”

They covered their chests and crouched down.

“C-calm down, both of you!” Shido hurried to explain. “The truth is, what you did just now is what’s supposed to seal your Spirit powers—”

“Shido? I saw a flash of light. Did something happen?”

Just when he thought things couldn’t get any worse, Tohka popped her head out from behind him.

“...?! T-Tohka?!” he yelped.

Her eyes grew wide in surprise as she took in the scene, and her face turned bright red. “Sh-Shido?! Wh-wh-what are you doing?!”

“N-no! You’ve got the wrong idea! I didn’t—”

“Shido suddenly ripped our clothes off...”

“Tears. No one will marry me now.”

Kaguya set him up perfectly for Yuzuru to deal the final blow. Tohka’s cheeks grew even redder, and she fixed a glare on him.

“Shidooooo!”

“H-hang on! I-I’m injur—ah! Aaaaaaah?!”

Shido’s shrieks echoed throughout the night woods.

Final Chapter

Shido? I Will...

A new dawn came after the storm had died down.

The next day, his class left the inn, and Shido stared out the window of the bus at the leveled trees as they headed to the airport for their flight to Tengu.

The students left large bags stuffed with clothes at the front desk, and after a few warnings from their teacher, they were told to hang around the lobby until it was time for their flight. Although most of them had already done plenty of shopping, they threw money around on souvenirs in the airport shop and indulged in airport delicacies in the food court.

They were in high school, the pinnacle of youth. They had screamed and yelled and run around on the beach the day before, and yet they apparently still had stamina in spades.

Shido slumped into a chair in the lobby and smiled weakly.

“Aah, it feels like we just got here,” Tonomachi said, smiling beside him, sunburned from only the neck up for some reason.

“Yeah... It does,” he replied, looking like the husk of an ancient, withered tree.

He had been overcome with lethargy after he summoned Sandalphon the previous evening, but a night’s sleep had added an intense muscle pain to the mix. That said, if this was the price to be paid for wielding the power of an Angel with a human body, if it was the price to be paid for saving Kaguya and Yuzuru, then it was a small one.

“But it didn’t really feel like a school trip...” He sighed. Because he’d been caught up in the Spirit commotion, he hadn’t gotten to join in any group activities.

“Aah, c’mon, how come you’re so exhausted? You weren’t in the room last

night. Where were you? Hmm? What kind of sexy stuff you get up to? And with who?" Tonomachi grilled him, breathing hard.

Shido sighed in exasperation. "Why do you automatically assume it's sexy stuff...?"

"Gimme a break. A healthy teenage boy disappears for the night on his school trip and does nothing? The only person who'd believe that is a saint, or an idiot, or Tohka. So? Who was it? Tohka... No, not her. She's full of energy. Oh? You took on both of the Yamai sisters at once and used up every bit of strength you had? I don't see either of them around."

"Mm." Shido grinned. "Well, in a sense, yeah."

He hadn't seen a hint of Kaguya and Yuzuru since he left the inn. After the previous night's events, they had been transferred to *Fraxinus*. He probably wouldn't see them again until Ratatoskr finished its battery of examinations after he and his class returned to Tengu.

For convenience's sake, they had been treated as transfer students. But he didn't yet know if they would keep attending his high school.

Now that they had reconciled, their mental state was stable and top-notch, even compared with the other Spirits. The day when they could walk through town side by side was not likely so far away.

"Hey!" Tonomachi loomed in close. "You trying to give me the slip here? Wait. Was it actually Tobiichi? She's not here, either. What kind of hardcore stuff did you get up to?"

"Origami...?" Shido asked, scratching his cheek. He hadn't seen her, either, since they'd left that morning.

According to Reine, she'd waited until the heavy winds died down and then had Origami taken to a nearby hospital, so she would most likely be returning to Tengu later. She had been attacked by the very Bandersnatches he'd faced. He hoped she was all right.

Just when Tonomachi was about to press him further for details, he heard the voice of Tama in the distance.

“Okay, everyone! It’s just about time, so let’s all come together here!”

“Ngh! Hey, Itsuka, you’re going to tell me everything later!” Tonomachi said with an exaggerated gesture that reminded Shido somehow of the villain who, after being defeated by the hero every week, shouted, “I’ll get you for this!”

“I—kay...” He managed to get to his feet somehow, and as if waiting for this cue, someone came running up behind him.

“Shido! I bought lots of sweets!” Tohka cried, grinning with hands full of bags from the souvenir shop. Even though she had played a role in the big fight, too, she was 1,000 percent full strength, completely recovered.

“Isn’t that kind of a lot?” He raised an eyebrow at the overstuffed bags.

“No way! Look! Limited edition Chupa Chups! Kotori’s gonna be so happy!”

When she grinned at him so carefree, so obviously overjoyed, he couldn’t say anything in response. He patted her head and walked slowly over to the meeting point.

“Okay then, is everyone here? We’re going to board the plane now, so please line up in order,” Tama called out as she looked over the students gathered in the lobby.

Chattering regretfully about the end of the trip, the students got in line.

“Shido, can I sit by the window on the way home?” Tohka asked, her eyes glittering. She was probably still vexed that Origami had taken the window seat on the flight to the island.

But Origami was in the hospital now, so he figured it would be fine.

“Yeah, I’m o—”

“That is unacceptable.”

“Huh?” he cried out, stunned by the voice that interrupted him.

When he looked back, he found Origami standing there on crutches, bandages wrapped around various parts of her body.

“O-Origami?!” His eyebrows shot all the way up. “What are you doing here?! And, like, those injuries... Are you okay?!”

“I am perfectly fine,” she said evenly.

“C-could you just go away already?!” Tohka shouted. “You can’t just show up out of nowhere!”

“The seating has already been decided. The window seat is mine. You can look from the aisle seat.”

“No fair! I get the window on the way home! I’m gonna look at the view with Shido!”

Tohka and Origami began to quarrel with Shido wedged in between them. With each shout, he was pushed back and forth, each movement an insult to his already tortured muscles.

“Hey, hang on. Hold up!” he said. “Calm down, both of you! Let’s settle this more peacefully—I know! We can decide with rock-paper-scissors, okay?”

“Mm... Is that the one where you compete with the three different hand shapes? That’s fine with me.” Tohka’s gaze grew sharper, and she clenched her fist.

“If you say so, Shido, I have no objection,” Origami replied.

“Good. Let’s settle this. Rock! Paper! Scissors! Shoot!” Tohka called, and she and Origami threw their hands out.

But Shido noticed something off there. For an extremely obvious reason. There were two hands too many in front of him.

“Huh?”

Tohka had rock. Origami also had rock. And the two hands thrust in from either side were both paper.

“Keh-keh... The jet-black magic stone triumphs over the air-rending double blades, but is defeated by the evil-crushing paper charm.”

“Declaration. It is a victory for Yuzuru and Kaguya. We will accept the seats on either side of Shido.”

“Kaguya? Yuzuru?!” Shido cried out when he looked up at the pair who had thrown the papers.

Yes. Standing there were Kaguya and Yuzuru, who had supposedly been collected by *Fraxinus* the previous evening. Behind them, he also saw Reine, her head wobbling.

When he shot a questioning look her way, she slowly walked over to him and whispered, "...They insisted on being on the same flight with you. Their condition's stable, and it's not good to stress them out for no reason, so we got special permission. The full set of examinations will take place after we get back to Tengu."

"O-okay, that's all well and good, but—," he started, only to be interrupted by the victors, Kaguya and Yuzuru, as they each slipped an arm around one of his.

"Keh-keh... Consider yourself honored, Shido. Although you were nothing but fodder for battle at first, I have taken an unexpected liking to you."

"Affection. As has Yuzuru. However, I do not wish to fight with Kaguya after we have finally reconciled."

"And thus, Shido, we have decided that you shall be the shared property of myself and Yuzuru."

"Agreement. That is a fact. We will love you to our hearts' content."

"H-huh?!" he shouted, baffled, while Tohka and Origami scowled and glared.

"Shido, what is the meaning of this? Did something actually happen when you stripped them naked?"

"Naked? What is this now? I demand an explanation."

"Uh-oh."

When Shido struggled to respond, Kaguya and Yuzuru snorted triumphantly from where they hung on his arms.

"Keh-keh... Apologies, Tohka. But the fact that you are my retainer is glory enough. At any rate, you were able to make an offering to me."

"Initiation. Master Origami, thank you so much for everything. I shall take your teachings to heart as I proceed forward."

Tohka and Origami each grabbed one of Shido's legs.

“Quit fooling around! I’m not letting you have Shido!”

“Do not appear out of nowhere and speak such nonsense.”

“Keh-keh... Such pluck! To challenge us, the Yamai sisters!”

“Counterattack. We accept your challenge. Witness the combined might of Yuzuru and Kaguya.”

The four girls began to pull Shido in four different directions.

“Hey...! Sto—!” His body, battered after the use of Sandalphon, screamed out at this final blow.



Kotori could feel her heart beating. It was unpleasantly loud.

She grinned a little as she heard her footsteps echo in the large hallway. This was partly due to the fact that she was the only one in this large space, but she was also a little nervous, in fact. She’d been to this place any number of times before, but she never seemed to get used to it.

She was in her usual red military uniform, but rather than having the jacket hang off her shoulders, she had actually put her arms in the sleeves and buttoned it up properly. Naturally, there was no lollipop in her mouth. If the crew of *Fraxinus* had seen her, their eyes might have popped out of their heads.

She stopped in front of a door and took a deep breath. And then she knocked.

“Kotori Itsuka, reporting.”

“Come in.”

“Sir,” she answered, pulled the door open, and stepped into the room.

The interior resembled a study. All four walls were filled with bookcases, and a number of leatherbound volumes rested on their shelves. She didn’t know what they were about. There was no text on the book lying open on the desk, only a series of dots. Braille.

And in the back of the room, a man.

“It’s been some time, Commander Itsuka,” he said, turning his chair and his face in Kotori’s direction.

Hair and beard mostly gray, kind eyes. He was likely in his fifties. He might not have had sufficient years to be called old, but he projected the aura of a friendly grandfather.

Rounds Chairperson Elliot Woodman. The founder of the Ratatoskr organization and Kotori's benefactor.

"It is a pleasure to see you again, Lord Woodman." She snapped to attention and bowed.

"Looks like you've been quite busy. The other members of Rounds were surprised."

"It is their job to be effusively surprised," Kotori said, and Woodman chuckled.

"Come now, don't say that. They are who they are, and essential personnel to Ratatoskr in their own way... Anyway, Commander Itsuka. I heard you used Camael. Not hurt, I hope?"

"No, sir. I apologize if I caused concern."

"Aah, I'm the one who needs to apologize for pushing you so hard," Woodman said, stroking his beard, before continuing in a quiet tone. "Incidentally, there was a report that just came in."

"A report, sir?"

"Mm-hmm. Apparently, *Fraxinus* was attacked by what appeared to be a DEM airship."

She nodded. She had already received this report. "I was informed. But Kannazuki is on the ship. There should be no issues."

"I suppose not. If there is a problem, it's more likely to be the other one."

"Meaning?" she asked.

Woodman hesitated for a moment. "It seems that your brother manifested an Angel."

"...!" Kotori's eyebrows jumped up her forehead. She swallowed hard and put a hand to her chest to try and calm the instantly frantic pounding of her heart. She got her breathing back under control before she replied, "Is that so?"

Already?”

“Mm-hmm. Most likely, sealing your Spirit power again is what triggered it.”

“...!” She gritted her teeth, and Woodman frowned apologetically.

“We may be forced to take *appropriate* measures in the case of an emergency. Otherwise, the Spirits we’ve worked so hard to seal might fall into catastrophe once more.”

“I...understand.” She quietly narrowed her eyes.

Woodman sighed. “I am sorry for pushing this unpleasant role on you.”

“No, it was inevitable... If the worst does come to pass.” Kotori nodded slightly before continuing.

“Shido? I will *kill* him.”

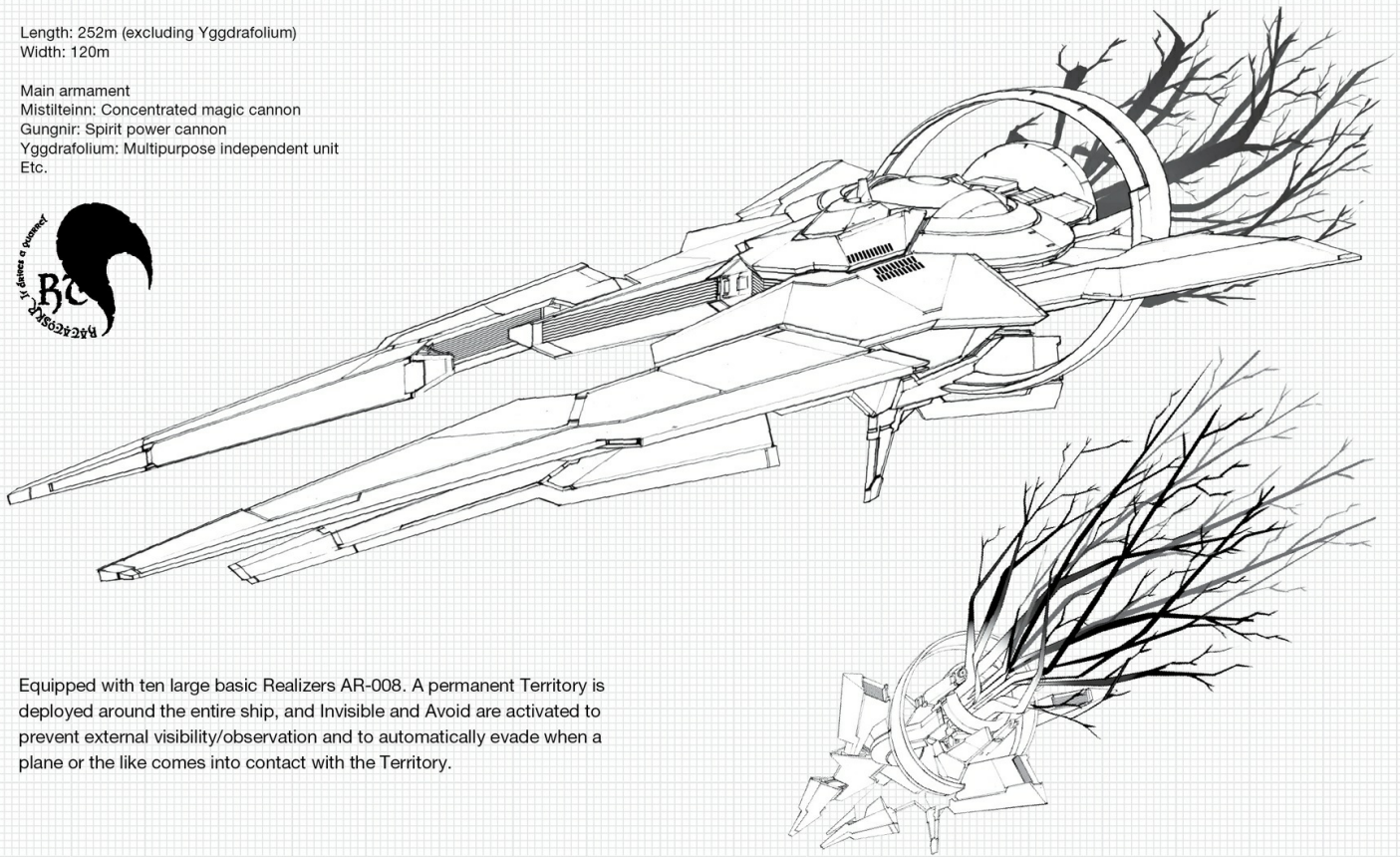


FRAXINUS

Fraxinus ASS-004

Length: 252m (excluding Yggdrafolium)
Width: 120m

Main armament
Mistilteinn: Concentrated magic cannon
Gungnir: Spirit power cannon
Yggdrafolium: Multipurpose independent unit
Etc.



Equipped with ten large basic Realizers AR-008. A permanent Territory is deployed around the entire ship, and Invisible and Avoid are activated to prevent external visibility/observation and to automatically evade when a plane or the like comes into contact with the Territory.

Ship design: Kanetake Ebikawa

Afterword

It's been some time. Koushi Tachibana here, bringing you *Date A Live, Vol. 5: Tempest Yamai*. For the first time, two Spirits appear at once, the twin sisters (?) Kaguya and Yuzuru. How did you like them? I do hope you had fun with this volume.

But despite the fact that this volume saw the appearance of two Spirits, I feel as though there were many other new characters. Well, the story does begin to move below the surface in this volume, so I suppose there's no helping that... At any rate, I truly do owe Tsunako a debt of gratitude.

The new character I like the most outside of the Spirits is Ellen. I had originally intended for her to play a minor role, but before I knew it, she had become a fun one for me to write. I love characters that make it worth the time you spend manipulating them.

And here is a general note. I'm sure many of you have noticed, but there is something different from usual with this volume. Yes. Please go back a page. In the spread before this Afterword, there is a blueprint of *Fraxinus*! The design is by Kanetake Ebikawa. Thank you so much for the wonderful design materials! It's super cool. Please take a look!

I have more announcements than usual this time, so I'll just get them all out here. The book collecting the serialization of ringo's manga version of *Date A Live* running in *Shonen Ace* goes on sale at last on August 25! The first book of the spin-off manga *Date A Strike* currently being serialized by Kakashi Oniyazu also goes on sale soon on September 8! Aah, it's simply wonderful. A powerful surge of three books including this one. Almost like a Jet Stream Attack. Position-wise, it's me that's the stepping-stone. Yikes.

And that is not the end of it. To celebrate the release of this very book, *Date A*

Live, Vol. 5: Tempest Yamai, and the manga versions of the series *Date A Live* and *Date A Strike*, there will be a multiple-purchase discount! I believe the details are on the cover of the book, so please do take a look!

And! The deadline for preordering the limited edition volume of *Date A Live, Vol. 6: Lily Miku* is fast approaching on August 31! I was kindly shown a mock-up, and the finish is extraordinary. Interested parties would do best to hurry!

Finally, I was able to bring you all this book because of the hard work of Tsunako, who is in charge of the illustrations again this volume, the designer, and everyone else involved in the publication. Allow me to thank them all once more.

The next volume is *Date A Live, Vol. 6: Lily Miku*. Lily is, of course, the flower, *yuri* in Japanese. Which means, well... You know what it means.

Now then, I do hope we will meet again in the next volume.

Koushi Tachibana

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